

本好きの 下剋上

司書になるためには
手段を選んでられません

第一部 **本がないなら
作ればいい! I**

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Ascendance of a Bookworm

(本好きの下剋上～司書になるためには手段を選んでいられません～)

Book 01

Soldier's Daughter

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Story Description:

Urano, a bookworm who had finally found a job as a librarian at a university, was sadly killed shortly after graduating from college. She was reborn as the daughter of a soldier in a world where the literacy rate is low and books were scarce. No matter how much she wanted to read, there were no books around. What is a bookworm to do without any books? Make them, of course. Her goal is to become a librarian! So that she may once again live surrounded by books, she must start by making them herself.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

Chapter 1: Prologue

My name is Urano Motosu, and I am twenty-two years old. I love books. I really love books. I love books more than I love getting enough food.

Psychology, religion, history, geography, education, folklore, mathematics, physics, geology, chemistry, biology, art, fitness, language, fiction... All of humanity's accumulated knowledge and insight has been tightly packed into these books, and I love each of them from the bottom of my heart.

Encyclopedias, stretching to fill the entire shelf; the collection of literature, with every volume in place; specialty magazines that look so simple on the cover, but hold such advanced contents; colorful periodicals full of photographs; countless novels, written with fastidious prose; light novels, lacking any depth but still selling fantastically; huge picture books, intended for children; manga, the comics that are the pride of Japan; comics and magazines published by and for fans... the rustling of each turning page is more intoxicating than the finest wine.

I also love the smell of the darkest corners of the library archives, where the dusty, even a little musty scent of ancient books fills the air. Just slowly breathing in the smell of old books sends waves of ecstasy crashing through my body. The smell of new books is equally irresistible! The smell of fresh ink on new paper tells me that there is something new waiting to be discovered between those pages, and just thinking about it fills me with excitement.

I want to live my entire life surrounded by books. If I can, I want to spend the rest of my life in a dark, but well-ventilated archive, where the books are shielded from the sun's damaging rays. I'd spend every second I could reading, inseparable from my books, until my skin became ghostly pale, my body weakened from lack of exercise, and I forgot so many meals that I had to be pulled away by force. I want to die buried in books. I don't want to quietly pass on in bed! Being smothered to death by a mountain of books would make me so unbelievably happy.

...Well, I should use the past tense here.

Because, just a little while ago...! There was a big earthquake, and I was crushed to death underneath a pile of books! Maaan, really, out of all my wishes to grant, why this?

I really did want this, but I'm not really feeling like God did me any favors here. I had just gotten my librarian certificate, and had somehow managed, in this age of unemployment, to find a position at a university library!

God, please. If I can, I'd like to be reborn. There's still so much more for me to read. Even in my next life, I want to read.

So, make me a librarian. Let me spend each day surrounded by books. Of course, I know that working as a librarian won't let me read all the time. It's a job, and I'll be busy, and I know that. But still, other jobs won't let me spend the entire day surrounded by books. Just being surrounded by books will make me happy. The intoxicating smell of ink and paper... who else could appreciate these feelings? Who else can feel this fluttering of my heart that occurs whenever I find myself looking back at all of this amassed history, these words written to preserve the insights of man, a uniquely human labor of the mind that is as old as writing itself?

If I can just read, that would be fine. Please, God. If you've heard my wish, please let me be reborn. When I am, I can read again.

Chapter 2: A New Life

Bang! Bang! A sound like someone striking the floor or a table rattles me awake, as wherever I was sleeping starts to wobble back and forth. With every oscillation, a shot of pain blasts through my skull like I was being punched in the head, and I let out a small moan.

Shut up... please... shut up...

The irritating noises and vibrations didn't stop, continuing at a steady rhythm, not letting me sleep at all.

I'm kept awake, painfully aware of the vibrations reverberating within my spinning head. I plug my ears, hoping it will go away. Moving around feels strange, like my body isn't doing exactly what I tell it to. All of my joints are sore, and I feel feverish all throughout my body, like I'd come down with the flu.

"Ugh..."

I need my glasses if I want to figure out what's going on. With my eyes screwed shut, I feel around for the glasses I always keep near my pillow. My entire body feels a little bit numb, and my arm's movements are sluggish. As I squirm, something beneath me rustles with a sound like grass or paper.

"...what's making that sound?"

The voice that comes out of my mouth sounds too high, almost childlike. It might be because I'm ill, but it's not at all the voice I'm used to hearing. Even though I want to do nothing more than sleep off this fever, I can't just ignore this many abnormalities around me. I slowly open my eyes. My field of vision is warped, thanks to this extremely high fever. I don't know if it's the tears in my eyes helping me see in place of my glasses, but everything is much clearer than it usually is.

"Eh?"

The first thing I notice is a ceiling that, while it may have originally been white, has been stained black with soot. Some number of thick, black

beams hold it up, across which a spider has build an enormous web. This is absolutely nothing like any room I remember.

“...Where am I?”

I look around the room, keeping my head perfectly still so as not to shake the tears from my eyes. It's obvious, from what I see, that much of what's around me is entirely unlike the Japan in which I was born and raised. Just from the architectural style of the ceiling, this isn't a Japanese-style building, it's Western. Furthermore, it's not a modern, steel-framed construction, but something much older. The bed I'm on is hard, and there's no mattress beneath me. Instead, I seem to be lying on some kind of cushion made of a prickly material. Through the dirty cloth that covers it, I smell a strange scent. On top of that, my body itches here and there, like I'm being bitten by ticks or fleas.

“W... wait a second...”

My most recent memory is being crushed under the weight of countless books, and I don't remember getting rescued at all. At the very least, I don't think any hospital in Japan would put a patient on top of a sheet this dirty. Timidly, I try to raise my hand over my head so that I can see it, and what I see is the small, slender hand of a child. I live a lifestyle where I was shut indoors with my books all day, so the untanned and almost unhealthy skin was no surprise, but at twenty-two years of age my hands were, of course, those of an adult. Completely different from these small, malnourished-looking hands before me now. These small, childlike hands that I can open and close at will. As I move around, my body does not feel at all like I'm used to it feeling. At this shocking realization, my mouth goes dry.

“...What's going on?”

It's possible that I might have reincarnated. God might have heard my dying wish and given me new life, so that I may read again. This is incomprehensible. I want to know more about the world around me, so I lift my heavy head and slowly push my feverish body upright. My sweat-soaked hair sticks to the side of my head, but I pay it no mind as I look

around the room. I see more bed-like platforms like the one I'm on, the dirty cloths on top of them, and a few boxes full of various things... but no bookshelves.

"There's no... books..."

The only door in this room swings open. In an instant, the pounding noise reverberating through my head goes away, only to be replaced by the sound of footsteps as somebody outside bustles about. I really have no idea what's happening. Based on the beams across the ceiling, the state of the walls, and the kinds of furniture in this room, I feel like this is something out of European history. There's nothing around me to indicate modern civilization. Is this an extremely backwards country, or have I somehow slipped through time and wound up in the past? If only I knew; if I did, I'd have a lot easier time figuring out my next move.

"...Am I hallucinating in my final moments?"

As worried tumble around my feverish head, a woman appears in the doorway, having heard me moving around and talking to myself. She is wearing a triangle bandana tied around her head and is in her late 20s, judging by the condition of her once-beautiful face. Her general facial features are pretty enough, but all of the dirt ruins it. If she were to wash her face (and her clothes), she'd look half-decent, but it's such a shame that she is the way she is now. Generally, I don't worry too much about someone's appearance (or my own, really) as long as they keep themselves clean; if they're filthy, though, I really wish that they'd put a little effort in, otherwise their beauty just goes to waste.

"Maine, %&\$#+@*+##%?" says the woman in a language I don't understand.

At the sound of her voice, someone else's memories burst through my consciousness, and I let out a small cry. In the blink of an eye, several years' worth of memories crowd into my mind. The sheer pressure of it feels like it's churning my brain to a pulp, and I grab my head in pain.

"Maine, are you all right? You didn't wake up for the longest time! I was starting to get worried."

“...Mom?”

A few memories bubble to the surface. The woman who came to check on me and is now gently stroking my head is my mother, and my name is Maine. I don't know how I suddenly started to understand what she was saying; this deluge of information has left my mind in shambles. Honestly, I wish this could have waited until I was feeling a little better. Sure, I wished that I could be reincarnate so that I could keep reading, and sure, it looks like I have, in fact, been reincarnated, but it's not like I'm just going to meekly accept that this woman in front of me is suddenly my mother.

“How are you feeling? It looks like you have a headache,” she says.

The fingers of the hand she places on my forehead are stained with green and yellow spots. Does her job involve working with dye? I remember that workers back in Japan that worked with indigo dye had similar stains on their hands. I don't want to let this so-called mother, who I simultaneously know nothing about yet somehow remember, touch me, so I flinch away from her outstretched hand, bury myself in the stinking bed, and screw my eyes shut.

“...My head... still hurts. I wanna sleep,” I say. “Oh, rest well.”

As my mother left this bed-filled room, I started to think deeply. Between the dizziness from my fever and the disarray in my head, there's no way I could just quietly get back to sleep.

“I'm not mistaken... I died, didn't I?”

Unbidden, an image of my own mother floats to the surface of my mind, and I silently apologize that I'll never see her again. She'll probably be furious, screaming “how many times did I tell you that you had too many books?!” while choking back tears of grief. I raise a sluggish arm and wipe a tear from my eye.

“I'm sorry, Mom...” I whisper, an apology that will never reach her ears.

I reluctantly let go of that image, and start to carefully sort through the memories of this child, Maine, that had been dumped into my head. Her latest memory was of having an extremely painful, painful fever, so

painful that she couldn't bear it. It seems to me like, somehow, the Maine who used to own this body died, and I possessed it in her place. Oh, or maybe I was actually reborn in this world, and the delirium of the fever is causing the memories of my past life to resurface?

"It doesn't matter, either way. I'm going to have to live as Maine from now on, there's no way I can change it..."

Since that's the case, I need to sift through Maine's memories to learn more about the situation I'm in; otherwise, my family might start to get suspicious. However, no matter how hard I think, Maine's memories are those of a little girl with still-developing language skills, and there's a lot that her parents said that she didn't really understand. She didn't know what they meant! She's missing a lot of useful words from her vocabulary, so most of what she remembers is cryptic and ambiguous.

"Whoa, no... what should I do?"

From Maine's childish little memories, I've figured out what I do know. Her family consists of four people. Her mother is the woman who was just in here. She has an older sister, Tory. Her father has a job that's something like a soldier.

And, most importantly, this is not Earth. From the image in Maine's head, underneath the bandana that her mother was wearing, her hair is a rich green, like jade. You might think that she'd have to dye it to get it that color, but it really is naturally green. It's such an unnatural color that I almost kind of want to check to see if it's a wig. It seems really unlikely, though, that she would be some kind of cosplayer who always wears a green wig and dirty clothes; it's much more realistic to think that I'm in some sort of alternate dimension.

Incidentally, Maine's sister's hair is blue-green, and her father's hair is blue. Maine's own hair is a deep navy blue. Should I be grateful that my hair is close to black, or should I be sighing at my cosplaying family? Regardless, this house doesn't seem to have a mirror, and no matter how much I dig I can't find a clear image of what I look like, apart from my hair color. Well, based on what I know about my mother and father's

looks, and what my sister looks like, I guess I don't look half bad. I'm also, without a doubt, filthy.

“Ughh, I really need a bath. ...Do we even have one?”

Realistically, my appearance isn't my biggest concern right now, it's my living conditions. It seems like the family that I've been reborn into is mind-blowingly poor. Just from looking around, things seem pretty bad. The cloth that I, a sick child, am wrapped in is extremely threadbare and worn-out. Even for hand-me-downs from my sister, this is too cruel. I briefly thought that this might be some kind of abuse, but according to Maine's memories even her mother's clothes are sewn together out of rags, and her sister's are much the same. This is the standard for my new family. My father's work clothes are relatively solid, with only a few patches, but even so he was only ever provisioned one uniform, and that was several years ago.

On top of that, this house doesn't seem to be stand-alone. The wall closest to me is made of some kind of brick, and through it I can hear footsteps climbing up and down stairs and the voices of people who I presume are our neighbors. Perhaps this is some kind of housing complex or apartment building?

So, about this reincarnation business... aren't I supposed to be reborn as some kind of nobility, so that I don't have to worry about living a difficult life?

I breathe a heavy sigh at the rest of my conditions. I may have had a perfectly ordinary lifestyle back in Japan, but that was massively different to what I'm facing now. I don't know what era or what country I've been born into now, but Japan was a nice place to live, overflowing with wonderful things. Comfortable fabrics, soft beds, books, books, more books...

“Aaah, I want to read a book. Reading always helps my fevers go down.”

No matter how dire my circumstances, I'll be able to endure it as long as I have books. I place a finger to my temple and concentrate, searching through my memory for books. Where in this house could the

bookshelves be?

“Maine, you awake?” A voice suddenly breaks through my concentration. A girl, about seven or eight years old, is walking towards me with light footsteps. According to my memories, this is Tory. Her blue-green hair is carefully woven in a simple braid, but I can tell at a glance that it’s extremely dried out and in bad need of washing. Just like her mom, she’s a little dirty all over, and I really want her to wash up. She’s wasting her adorable face.

I may be thinking that, but it’s the opinion of an outsider from Japan, a country with a high standard of personal hygiene. Even if you’re poor, you still want to maintain a healthy living environment; otherwise, you’ll fall ill, then you have to see a doctor, then you’ve spent money you don’t have.

I really don’t care that much about that right now, though. There’s exactly one thing that’s on my mind.

“Tory,” I ask, “could you bring me a ‘book’?”

Based on Tory’s age, there must be about ten or so picture books in the house. I may need to be resting to get over this sickness, but I can still read. Reading books from an alternate dimension is, right now, my highest priority above all else.

“Tory, please!”

Tory looks blankly at me, her adorable little sister, with her head tilted to one side. “Huh? What’s a ‘book’?”

“Wh... uhh, it’s a thing where ‘words’ and ‘pictures’ have been ‘written down’...”

“Maine, what are you talking about? I didn’t understand, what did you say?” “I told you, a ‘book’! I want a ‘picture book’!” “What’s that? I don’t really understand...?”

It seems like I might have accidentally used Japanese words in place of words that Maine doesn’t know. No matter how hard I try to explain it to Tory, she just stands there with her head cocked to one side and a dumbfounded expression on her face. Even if I were to just say “get me a

book” in Japanese, there’s no way she would understand. I have to dig up this vocabulary, and fast.

“Ugh, fine! ’Translation function, engaaaaage!” I yell. “Maine! What are you getting so mad about?!”

“I’m not mad! I just have a headache.”

Getting mad at Tory for not understanding me would be an extremely childish thing to do. ...I did, though.

First off, I need to start focusing everything I’ve got to listening carefully to what people around me are saying and, little by little, start to memorize all of the words I hear. Between Maine’s young, flexible brain and my own 22 year old college graduate’s intuition, memorizing vocabulary should be easy... in theory. At the very least, if I think back on what I went through when I was learning other languages so that I could read foreign books, it wasn’t unmanageably difficult. The zeal and love with which I dedicated myself to my books was enough to drive other people away.

“...Are you angry because you still have a fever?” asks Tory. She reaches her hand towards my forehead, probably to feel my temperature. Without thinking, I grab her filthy hand before she can touch me.

“I’m still sick, won’t you get sick too?” I ask. Although I’m pretending to show concern for my sister, I’m really just trying to stop her from doing something disgusting. I really don’t want Tory to touch me with those filthy hands, so I’m employing this adult technique to avoid it.

“Oh, I guess so. Take care!”

Safe. If she were clean, she’d be a great older sister, but right now I don’t want to be touched at all. If this is the situation I’m in, then I’m going to have to pound the concept of hygiene into their skulls. If I don’t start improving things around here, I don’t think I’ll be able to survive. According to these memories, Maine has always been a weak child, and was bedridden and feverish far too often. I have too many memories of this bed.

If I’m going to be able to read to my heart’s content, I need to first make

sure that I'm healthy and that my environment is sanitary. This family is way too poor, so if I get sick nobody will be able to call a doctor. Even if they did, from the looks of this place I can't imagine they'd be any good, so I definitely don't want to have to be in their care.

Mother calls from another room. "Tory, come help me with dinner!"

"Yes, mother," says Tory, and runs away with a pitter-patter.

Judging from the angle of the sunlight that streams through the window, it probably is time to start dinner preparations. Tory looks like she should still be in elementary school, but already she's helping out a lot with the housework. What a state of poverty this is, for children to be relied on for manual labor.

"Ugh, this is bad..."

The thought of what my life will be like when I grow up is really depressing. No matter how I think about it, I'm going to be stuck doing housework forever. I'm not going to have very much time for reading. Housework was already a huge bother when I was still in Japan with all of its convenient appliances; is a useless woman like me who spends all her time reading even able to adapt to life like this?

Bang! Bang! An intermittent, lively sound reverberates through the room. Mom said it was time to work on preparing dinner, so that's probably the sound of cooking, but what in the world is happening out there? I can't see anything from where I am, but at the same time I really don't want to know that badly.

I have to stay positive! I'm not going to waste this reincarnation. There are books here to read that I could have never read on Earth! My first order of business is to take care of my physical condition. With that decided, I slowly close my eyes.

"I'm home!"

"Hi, Father!"

I hear clanging sounds, like metal plates rubbing against each other. My father has returned home, just in time for dinner. Maine is still too

feverishly sick to eat, so I gradually drift off to the sounds of the happy family meal in the other room. As my mind slips into the dark, there's only one thought on my mind.

Ah, I don't care what it is, I just want to read a book.

Chapter 3: Home Exploration

After three days, my fever finally went away, and I've slowly recovered enough to be able to keep some food down. What I've been eating has been finely chopped vegetables floating in bland soup. It's okay for now since I've been sick, but I don't think I'll be able to stand it once I'm healthy again. Also, I'm pretty used to being called Maine by now. I'm going to have to live as Maine for the rest of my life, so I need get used to it quickly.

"Maine, you done?" asks Tory as she comes in to check on me. "Yeah."

I hand my empty dishes over to her, and quietly lie back down on my bed.

"Get some rest, Maine."

In these last three days, I haven't even left this room! I've only ever gotten up to use the restroom, and after that I'm always brought right back to bed. Isn't that too harsh? On top of that, I said "restroom", but it's really just a chamber pot kept in the bedroom. It's extremely embarrassing! Also, not only does the rest of the family use this same chamber pot, but when they're done, they just fling the contents out the window! And, of course, there's no bath, either! I couldn't stand it after a while and tried to wipe myself clean, and everyone looked at me as if I'd gone insane. This lifestyle... I can't take it anymore!!

It's not like I can do anything about it, though. As a very young, sick child, even if I were to run away, there's no way I'd be able to live the kind of life I'd want. I still have the mind of an adult, so this much is obvious. I'm not going to heedlessly run away, no matter how much I hate this situation. Judging from what I've seen in here so far, I don't think the outside is going to be much better. I have no idea if there's any child protection services or shelters or anything like that around here, and even if there were I don't know if they'd be any improvement over this place.

If I run away from the filth here, all that'll happen is that I'll spend my last few days running around the streets, getting covered in falling waste,

and finally dying on the side of the road. What I need to do is focus on getting better so that I can then work on improving the conditions around here.

My first goal is to get well enough that I can get out of bed without people being mad at me.Well, it's a start.

Then, before anything else: books. The first step towards improving my environment is definitely finding books. If I have a book, then I'll be able put up with all of these grievances. I'll persevere! And, so, I have decided that today I'm going to go explore this house. I've gone too long without reading a book; I'm starting to feel the edges of withdrawal.

Give me a book! Raaagh! I'll cry! A grown woman will burst into tears in public!

Since I've got an older sister, I should be able to find around ten picture books somewhere in here. Unless I'm mistaken, I don't think I actually know how to read this language, but at least I can look at the pictures and try to puzzle out the meanings of each word.

The door opens quietly, and Tory sticks her head in. "Maine, you sleeping?" she whispers. I lie quietly in my bed, and she nods in satisfaction. Every time I've woken up, I've slipped out of bed in search of a book, only to collapse as I wandering around, so Tory has taken it upon herself to keep a close watch on me. When our mother leaves in the morning to go to work, she leaves Tory in charge of my care. Tory has been desperately trying to keep me in bed, and with my tiny body, no matter how much I try to run I can never break free from her grip.

"I am absolutely going to 'dominate' you," I mutter. "What was that?" asks Tory. "...Hm? Oh, I just want to get big."

Not really understanding the real meaning behind my answer, Tory gives me a troubled smile. "If you get healthy again, you'll get bigger! You're always so sick that you're not eating, so even though you're five, people still think that you're three."

Oh, am I five, then? With an atypically frail build. This is the first I've heard of it. I can't remember any birthday parties, so I couldn't figure it

out for myself. Or, maybe, could there have been parties that I just don't recognize, since I don't know the language very well?

"Tory," I ask, "Are you big?"

"I'm six, but everyone thinks I'm seven or eight, so maybe I'm a little big?" "Ahh."

We're only a year apart, but what a difference in physique. Surpassing her might be extremely difficult, but I can't give up just yet. I'm going to eat right, take care of my hygiene, and get healthy.

"Mom's gone to work," says Tory, "so I need to wash the dishes. Really, don't get out of bed! If you don't sleep, you won't get better, and if you don't get better, you won't grow any bigger!"

"Okay!"

In preparation for sneaking out, I've been playing the good kid ever since last night so that Tory will let down her guard a little bit. I've been waiting patiently ever since for her to finally leave me alone and go somewhere else.

"Right, I'm going now. Be good and stay here, okay?"

"Okaaaay!" I answer, the picture of obedience.

Tory closes the door with a clack. I wait quietly as she grabs the box full of dirty dishes and heads out the door. I don't know where she goes to wash the dishes, but she's always gone for about twenty to thirty minutes. It looks like each home doesn't have its own water supply, so there's probably a well or fountain for public use.

Heh heh heh... Now, get out!!

From what I think is the entranceway, I hear the clunk of a turning lock, followed by the fading sound of Tory's footsteps on the stairway. I wait until I can't hear her at all anymore, then quietly get out of my head. I grimace as I feel the grit of the floor bite into my bare feet. Walking around barefoot in a house where everyone wears shoes is profoundly disgusting, but Tory, in an attempt to stop me from walking around, hid

my shoes, so I have no choice. Searching for a book is my top priority, I have no time to worry about the defilement of my feet.

“If they’re in here after all, I might have spoke too soon...”

In this bedroom where my feverish self has been locked away, there are two beds, three wooden boxes full of clothing and other miscellaneous things, and a few baskets with other sundry items. In the basket next to my bed, there’s a few toys made from wood and straw, but no books. If there’s a bookshelf, it would probably be in the living room.

“Yyyuck...”

With every step I take, the gritty floor grinds into the soles of my feet. It’s customary here to walk around the house with shoes on, so I know that even if I want to complain, it’s not going to do very much good. Even still, the customs of Japan have been so thoroughly ingrained in me that it’s going to be next to impossible to adapt. If I’m going to keep living as Maine, though, there are a lot of things I’m going to have to get used to.

“Grr, too high...”

I’ve hit the first major obstacle in my home exploration: the bedroom door. It’s not as if I can’t reach the knob at all; if I stand on my tiptoes and reach as high as I can go, my fingertips just barely brush the bottom of it. Turning it, however, is a much bigger problem. I glance around the room, looking for something to use as a stool. My gaze settles on the wooden box my clothes are stored in.

“Hnnnngh!”

If I were an adult, moving this box would be a piece of cake, but no matter how hard I push and pull, my little hands can’t budge it. I could maybe flip over the basket that holds my toys, but it doesn’t look like it would be able to support my weight.

“Man, I’ve got to get bigger soon; there’s too much I can’t do right now.”

After looking around the bedroom some more and thinking over my options, I decided to try folding up my parents’ bedding and standing on that. There’s absolutely no way that I’d let my own bedding touch this

grimy floor that people walk on with boots, but my parents are used to living in conditions like this so it's absolutely fine to use theirs. If it's for the sake of finding a book, making my parents a little upset is no big deal at all.

“Hup!”

I stand on my tiptoes on top of the folded bedding and grab the doorknob. I twist with the entire weight of my body, and the knob turns. The door swings open with a creak... right towards me.

“Wha?!”

The door swings right towards my head with great force. I frantically let go of the knob, and stumble backwards.

“Who-o-o-o-a!”

With a clatter, I tumble off of the piled-up bedding and hit my head.

“Ow...”

I clutch my head as I rise to my feet. I notice that the door is still slightly ajar! My headache is only just another sacrifice to the cause.

“I did it! It's open!”

I leap forward, stick my fingers into the crack, and pull the door the rest of the way open. I see that my parents' mattress has slid across the floor, and it's left a clean track behind it... but I'll pretend not to notice for now.

“Aha, the kitchen!”

I leave the bedroom and find myself in a kitchen. “Kitchen” in the modern sense of the word might be a little, generous; this really looks more like an old-style cookhouse. In the corner I see a stove, with a cast iron pot sitting on top, and something that looks like a frying pan hung up on the wall next to it. A clothesline runs across the room, from which a grimy-looking cleaning rag hangs. Anyone trying to wipe something off with that rag is surely only going to make it worse.

“It's no wonder I've got a weak constitution with sanitation like this...”

In the center of the room is a somewhat small table, two three-legged stools, and a box that seems to be being used as another stool. On the right side of the room is a wooden cabinet, probably being used as a cupboard. In the corner opposite the stove sits a large basket, filled with raw vegetables that look almost like potatoes and onions. There's a sink here as well, with a large jug of water next to it. The sink is probably filled by pouring water from the jug; it looks like there really isn't running water here.

As I finish looking around the room, I notice two more doors besides the one leading back to the bedroom.

"Ohoho, which one is the right one?"

This kitchen really doesn't look like the kind of place where I'd find a bookshelf, so I open one of the other doors that head out of the kitchen.

"Hm, a storage room?"

Beyond the door is a room that's crammed full of a mess of tools and things that I've never seen before. Everything's on shelves, but things are piled on them so haphazardly that it doesn't look like anything in here is used very much at all.

"Wrong one, huh..."

I give up on this room and head over to the second door. I reach up and pull on the knob, but the lock only clunks dully against the frame. I rattle the door again and again, but there's no sign of it giving way at all.

"Don't tell me, this is the door Tory went through...? Eh? Both were wrong?! Neither were right?!"

Suddenly perplexed, I mumble aloud to myself. This is a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen... but no bath, no toilet, no running water, and no bookshelves. No matter how hard I look, I can't find another room.

Hey, God, do you have a grudge?!

In all of the light novels out there about reincarnation, the vast majority of them dropped the protagonist amongst the rich and noble, and very few

of the remainder place her in abject poverty. I have the memories and sensibilities of a modern-day citizen of Japan; there is no way I'm going to be able to live in a house with no bath, no toilet, no running water.

On top of that, the thing that I was most worried about: I can't find any books. I looked all through the storage room and couldn't find anything even remotely resembling a book.

"...No way, are books expensive?"

On Earth, before the invention of machines that could print books easily, books were ridiculously expensive. If you weren't a member of the highest echelons of society, your opportunities to read books were few and far between.

"I've got no choice. If it's come to this, right now, I need to find words."

Even if I don't have any books, it's still possible for me to start learning to read. There could be newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, calendars, even advertisements! There absolutely has to be something around here that has at least one word written on it somewhere.

At least, there would be in Japan.

"...Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Not a single thing! What kind of house is this?!"

I have gone through every item on every shelf of the storage room and the cupboard, and not only have I, of course, still not found any books, but there hasn't been so much as a single letter printed on anything at all. Printing aside, I can't even find a single piece of paper!

"What the heck is... this..."

Blinding pain blasts through my head, as if my fever had come roaring back. My heart pounds in my chest, and I am deafened by the sudden ringing in my ears. I crumple to the floor, as if the strings holding me up were suddenly cut. My eyes are so hot.

Dying, crushed by books, had been my dream; being reincarnated, well, that's okay too. But how am I supposed to live like this? What am I to live

for? I hadn't even thought that I could be reborn into a world without books. Why was I even born?!

Tears run down my face as I struggle to find a reason to keep living.

"Maine!! What are you doing up?! You shouldn't have gotten out of bed without your shoes!" shouts Tory, as she walks into the kitchen to find me crumpled on the ground.

"...Tory... there's no 'books'..."

Even though I want to read so badly, there's no books. I have no idea why, or even how, I'm going to keep living on.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" asks Tory, concerned, as I lay there with tears constantly streaming from my eyes. There's no way for me to explain. She can't even see that not having books is a problem, how could she understand my feelings?

I want a book.

I want to read.

Hey, is there even anyone out there who would understand?

Where can I find a book?

Please, someone tell me.

Chapter 4: Town Exploration

After breakfast with my family, my mother fussed over my puffy face.

“Ah, your fever’s gone.”

With hands still cold from washing up, she feels my forehead, then rubs at the corners of my eyes. The coolness of her touch feels amazing.

“Say, Maine,” says my mother, “now that you’re well, would you like to help with the shopping today?”

“Huh? Mommy, what about work? My fever’s gone now, so is it okay for you to not go to work?”

Didn’t she say something earlier, like... “Work at the dyer’s shop is unbelievably busy right now, so even though Maine has a fever, I can’t take any time off”? She’s a working woman! Is this okay?

She looks at me, with my head cocked curiously to one side, then looks down sadly.

“Tory has been taking care of almost all of your nursing, and I thought it was such a shame that I wasn’t letting her go outside even a little... but yesterday, you were crying and crying, and Tory got so concerned. She said that she thought you might have started crying because you were so lonely, so she went around and begged our neighbors to help me take some time off.”

At those words, my breath caught in my throat. I, a woman with the mental maturity of a twenty-two-year-old, spent an entire day crying, without even bothering to think of what anyone around me would think. I’m so ashamed that I want to go dig a hole and bury myself in it. Now that I’ve finally calmed down, what I did seems so unbelievably embarrassing.

“I’m... I’m... sorry...” I stammer. “You don’t need to apologize, Maine. Being sick makes everyone feel a little helpless.”

My mother gently strokes my head to comfort me. Her gentleness only makes my feelings of guilt crash down on me even harder.

I'm so sorry. I was crying out of despair from realizing that there were no books, not at all because I was lonely because you were gone. Going looking for books as soon as Tory left the house... I don't know what I was thinking. I'm truly, truly sorry.

"Tory's going with everyone to the forest nearby," says my mother, "but I don't want you to push yourself when you've only just gotten better. How about coming with me and doing some shopping?"

"Yeah!" I reply. "Oh! You cheered up quickly."

My mother smiles happily at me, probably thinking that I'm overjoyed to spend some time with her.

I grin back at her. "It's gonna be fun!"

My mother looks so happy, so I'm in no hurry to tell her this, but the real reason for my mood swing was the realization that if I went outside, I might be able to get something to read. If I come along to go shopping, I might even be able to get my mother to buy me a book! It doesn't have to be a really thick one. For now, all I want is something that will help me learn the writing system. A workbook or something like that, aimed at kids, would be perfect. Maybe even just a chart with all of the letters on it!

I'm positive that if I smile cutely and say something like, "I won't get lonely if I have a book! I'll be a good girl and stay inside and help with the chores," then my mother will eventually cave to the begging of her adorable, frail little girl and buy me a picture book. Eh heh heh. This is going to be fun indeed.

"Mom, I'm heading out," says Tory, peeking into the bedroom with a huge smile on her face. Since our mother has the day off today, Tory, who would ordinarily be stuck watching me, has the day off as well.

"Alright, go meet up with everyone. Take care out there!" says our mother. "Yes, Mom!"

Tory slings a big wicker basket over her back like a backpack, then takes off with a spring in her step. She's acting like she's going to go play with her friends, but in reality this is yet another chore. She's gathering

firewood! While she's at it, she'll also be looking out for nuts, berries, and mushrooms to bring back with her. Whether our next few meals will be tasty or bland depends entirely on Tory.

You can do it, Tory! Spice up my life!

Children in this world seem to be put to work helping out with the chores very early in this world. It seems like there aren't any schools in this world, in addition to everything else that's missing. At the very least, I didn't see anything that looked like a school at all when I was digging through my memories. Tory's starting to grow up a little bit, so it looks like she's starting to work as an apprentice.

If I can, I'd like to do my apprenticeship under a librarian, or maybe even at a bookstore. Today will be a perfect day for me to gather some information while we're out and about. I'll figure out where the bookstore is, then make friends with the shopkeeper, and eventually become their apprentice. Hey, it's okay to be impressed by the cunning of this little girl, heh heh.

"Now then, Maine, shall we head out as well?"

This will be my first time leaving this building since I became Maine! The first time I've worn clothing that wasn't just pajamas, too. These clothes are worn-out hand-me-downs as well, but they're a little thicker, and I've been bundled up in countless layers. I'm so fluffy that it's hard to move! It would seem that it's cold outside.

I reach up to take my mother's hand, and follow her, for the first time, outside.

Cold! Cramped!! Stinky!!!

The buildings are all made of stone, and it feels like their walls are sucking what little heat there is out of the air. Despite all of the clothes that I'm bundled in, the frigid air seeps through immediately, chilling me to the bone.

I'd give anything for some Heat-Tech, or some fleece, or even one of those chemical warmer things. While I'm wishing, I want a face mask, too!

Something to block this stench and stop me from getting sick again.

Immediately outside the house is a stairway. A stairway so steep and narrow that I, stuck with the athletic ability of a three-year-old, am terrified of taking even the first step. My mother pulls on my hand, and we go down, with the warped boards creaking beneath our feet as we turn and turn and turn. After about two stories, though, the wooden stairs are replaced by sturdy, well-maintained stone.

This is the same building... why's there such a difference?

My face may be screwed up against the cold and stench, but I'm finally outside. By my estimation, I think our house is on the fifth floor of this seven-story building. Honestly, with my tiny body, weak constitution, and general lack of strength, even just going outside is heavy labor by itself. I guess it's only natural that most of Maine's memories are of being indoors.

"Haaahh, haaahhhh... Mommy, I can't... breathe... Slow down!"

We've only just started, and already I'm completely out of breath. I'm so weak that I have no idea if I'll even be able to drag myself to our destination without collapsing in the street.

"We've only just left the house! Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. Let's go."

At the very least, I want to figure out where the bookstore is. As I take some time to catch my breath, I take a look around my surroundings. Right outside our apartment building is something like a small plaza, centered on a public water well. The area immediately around the well has been paved with stone, and it's full of old ladies chatting while they scrub away at their laundry. This must be the place where Tory goes to do the dishes, and where that big water jug gets filled up every morning.

"Mommy, did you do the laundry?" I ask. "I did! It's all done already."

These clothes still look a little dirty, but they've apparently been washed. Perhaps the detergent here isn't very good... I'm going to have to think about making some soap, too.

The plaza is surrounded on all sides by other tall apartment buildings, with a single road leading out to the rest of the town. We make our way along that narrow street, turn the corner, and find ourselves in an enormous main avenue.

Whoa, the streets of a foreign country...

The unfamiliar townscape stretches out before me. Pack animals, vaguely like horses or donkeys, clop along the cobbled roads, passing the merchants' stalls that fill both sides of the streets.

"Mommy," I ask, "What store are we going to?"

"Hmm, Maine, what are you saying? We're going to the town market, you know? We don't usually go to the shops."

It seems like the neatly-kept shops set up in the first floor of these buildings are usually frequented by people who actually have money, and lowly commoners like us usually don't have any need to go there. Instead, the daily shopping seems to be done at the town's market.

...So, does that mean that the bookstore is going to be a shop in one of these buildings, then?

As I look around, searching for any sign of a bookstore, I catch sight of an impressively large building, which looks like a local landmark. It's simply built, but its off-white stone walls radiate majesty and draw the eye to it.

"Oh, a castle?" I ask, pointing at the building. "That's the temple, you know? When you're seven, you'll be going there to get baptized."

Ah, a church. A church, hmm. I really dislike the obligations of religion. I'd really rather not get anywhere near there, if I can help it.

Thanks to my modern Japanese sensibilities, I want to keep my distance from religion. I'm not sure how acceptable that's going to be in this world, though, so I bite back my objections. Instead, I turn my attention to the walls I see beyond the temple.

"Mommy, what about those walls?"

“Those are castle ramparts,” she says. “The lord of the land makes his home in there, as do the rest of the nobility. We don’t really have much business there, though.” “Hmmm...”

I can’t see anything besides tall, stone walls, so from here it looks less like a castle and more like a prison. Maybe they’re built like that so that they’re fortified against outside attack? For some reason, when I think of European-style castles, I imagine them to be really luxurious. Ah, although, I guess it does kind of look like a castle that also needed to be a fortress.

“So, what’s that wall?”

“That’s the outer wall. It protects this district from the outside world. If you keep going straight along this road, you’ll find a gate going outside. Your dad’s probably working there right now.” “...Daddy?”

From Maine’s memories, I know that my father is some kind of soldier, but I didn’t know he was a gate guard. More importantly, though, the lord’s castle is built like a fortress and surrounded both by ramparts and the outer walls. Based on that, I wonder if I should be thinking of this place as a city? Judging by the size of the walls surrounding this district and the stampede of people that fills this street, this doesn’t seem to be a fairly large district, but I’m comparing it to, say, Tokyo or Yokohama, and I don’t know how valid that comparison really is.

Aaaaargh, the size of a bookstore depends on the size of the city, and I don’t even have a basis for comparison! Is this district big? Is it small?! Please, tell me, O great teacher!

“Maine, let’s get going,” says my mother. “If we don’t get to the market soon, all the good things will be gone!” I nod. “Okay.”

As we walk, I keep my eyes peeled, constantly on the lookout for any sign of a bookstore. Strangely enough, I notice that the signs advertising the shops that line the streets are all illustrated. There’s wooden signs with images painted on them, and metal signs with graphics engraved or beaten into them, but I have yet to see a single thing that looks like a written word. These signs are all designed so that even someone like me,

who can't read at all, can understand them easily, which has made searching for a bookstore really easy, but... I suddenly have a terrifying thought.

Huh? Is there anything written down here at all? Not just in our house, but in this entire district? Maybe the literacy rate is low? ...Maybe, writing hasn't even been invented yet?!

The color drains from my face as I realize the ramifications of this idea. I'd never even bothered to think that writing itself might not exist. If the written word hasn't been discovered, after all, books just don't exist.

"Maine, there's lots of people out here. Don't fall behind!" says my mother, chidingly. "...Yeah," I say in a small voice.

I'm barely conscious of the movement of my feet as I struggle to hold back my terror, so we arrive at the market before I know it. The chattering of a crowd unexpectedly assaults my ears, and I lift my head to see a bustling square, packed with carts, stalls, and people milling about. It kind of reminds me of the crowds you'd see at festivals back in Japan, and for a second I feel strangely nostalgic.

Suddenly, I spot something at a nearby fruit stand that I had given up all hope of seeing. My eyes go wide and I start grinning uncontrollably, and I tug on my mother's skirt to get her attention.

"Mommy, look! There's something 'written' there!!"

Wooden signs have been fixed to each basket of merchandise, and written upon them are some sort of glyphs. I can't read them, so I don't know if they're numbers or letters, but one thing's for sure: writing does indeed exist here. Just from seeing this one thing, blood rushes to my face, and I'm keenly aware of how hungry I've been for writing.

"Oh, that's the price. That's there so that you know how much you'll need to pay if you buy it."

"But it's written!!" I exclaim.

My mother must be confused as to why I've suddenly become so energetic, but that doesn't matter right now. As we walk around, I have

her read off every single number I can find, and I focus as hard as I can on matching the numbers to the symbols.

All right, all right! Come on, my synapses!!

“So, is this one thirty lions?” I ask.

After a while of having numbers read to me, I cut in and read one out loud on my own, then look up at my mother for her reaction. It looks like I’m right: my mother is looking down at me, blinking in astonishment.

“That’s amazing, Maine, you picked that up so quickly!”

“Heh heh...”

There are ten numerals, so it looks like the counting system is in base 10. I’m really glad it’s not in base 2, or base 60, or anything else like that. Now that I know what symbols are attached to which numbers, performing calculations should be a piece of cake.

Ah, could it be, have I tripped the Genius flag? Although, that is the kind of flag that says I’ll be a prodigy at ten, merely talented at fifteen, and then just ordinary after I hit twenty...

Chapter 5: Books - Impossible to acquire.

“Now then, last on the list is meat. We’re going to get a lot of it, and then we’re going to need to salt it, or maybe smoke it...”

“Why are we buying so much?” I ask. “We have to prepare for winter, you know?” replies my mother. “Around this time of year, the farmers all have to bring their livestock in for the year. Anything that won’t make it through the winter gets butchered, so this time of the year is when the most meat is sold. The animals have also been eating a lot to prepare for winter, so their meat is very fatty and delicious.”

“...Umm, in the winter, does the market go away too?” “Of course it does, you know? There aren’t very many vegetables gathered during the winter, so the market isn’t open very often.”

Now that I think about it, it’s obvious, but the thought hadn’t occurred to me at all. In Japan, before greenhouse cultivation became commonplace, vegetables were sold seasonally, and before distribution methods were developed, they were all grown locally. You can keep food fresh for long periods of time with freezers or refrigerators, but before those things existed, you needed to actually preserve the food in your house.

“...I’ve never actually prepared for winter,” I mumble. “Did you say something?” asks my mother. “Nuh-uh.”

Preserving food at home, huh... Where in that tiny apartment are we going to preserve anything? That storage room isn’t nearly big enough, right? Man, I’m glad that I’m a such a little girl; I’m so small that I’d only get in the way if I tried to help, so I’m not going to be scolded when I don’t.

“...Erk, it stinks!”

“That’s the smell of meat!”

The stench grows unbearable as we approach the butchers. I pinch my nose to stop the smell, but my mother keeps walking forward, looking like

this was nothing out of the ordinary.

Meat's supposed to smell like this? Ughhh, I've got a bad feeling about this...

Even though my nose is plugged, the air is so foul that the very taste of it makes my eyes water as I finally arrive at the row of butchers' shops. On the counters, aside from the bacon and ham I expected, legs of meat are lined up, still attached to the feet and recognizable as animal parts. Inside the shop, dead animals, drained of blood, swing from the rafters. Bunnies and birds line the shelves, their eyes wide open and their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

"Gyaaaaaaah!!" I scream. "What's wrong, Maine?!"

To be honest, for someone like me, who's only ever seen raw meat after it's already been completely disassembled, cut up into little pieces, and put in packs, the butchers' shops of this world are a little too over-stimulating. All the hairs on my body stand on end, tears stream down my face, and I screw my eyes shut to block out the awful sight. The single glimpse I caught, though, remains fixated with my mind, and won't go away no matter how much I want to forget it.

"Maine? Maine?!"

My mother shakes me side to side. At that instant, a pig screams as its dissection begins, and my eyes snap open. Smiling people have gathered around me, watching and waiting eagerly as an animal is murdered right in front of them.

Why do you look like this is fun, people? Why are you smiling so much?! Stop it! Stop it stop it! This is terrifying!!

"Urkh....."

The pig squeals out one final time as the knife rams home. My own small cry joins it, and I faint on the spot.

Something's being poured into my mouth. It's a harsh, astringent, extremely stimulating liquid that smells like strong alcohol. Since I'm not quite awake enough to drink it properly, it flows straight down my

windpipe. I leap to my feet, my eyes wide open, and start an enormous coughing fit.

“Cough! Cough! Cough!”

Is this actual alcohol?! What unbelievable idiot would dare force such a powerful spirit down the throat of such a helpless and innocent young child?! What would you do if I’d gotten alcohol poisoning?!

My mother is next to me, holding a bottle of alcohol.

“Maine, are you awake? Ahh, that’s a relief, I’m so glad that I could wake you up.”

“Cough! ...Mommy?!”

With a huge sigh of relief, my mother hugs me tightly. I might not be very good at putting things into words at the moment, but I can speak my mind now, right?

Don’t shove such a strong alcohol down the throat of a small child!! And especially do not do so to a child who not only has a weak constitution, but has also just finally recovered from a fever so high that you thought she would die!! Are you trying to kill me?! Are you an idiot?! Do you want me to die?!

“Alright then, Maine. Now that you’re awake, let’s go back and get that meat.”

“What?!”

A shudder ripples through me. That horrifying spectacle has already been seared into my memory. It flashes before my eyes like a daydream, and just the memory of it gives me goosebumps. I do not want to go back there. This woman, she used strong alcohol to revive a young girl, and now she’s taking the girl who literally just fainted at the sight of the butcher and dragging her back to the butcher... could it be that she’s a brute?

“...Ummmm, I still don’t feel good,” I say. “I’m gonna stay here. Mommy, go ahead!”

“Eh? But...”

I give my hesitant mother a sidelong glance, then spin in place to face the lady running the shop. I need to secure my position before she drags me away.

“Excuse me, but could you let me wait here?” I say to the shopkeep. “I’m not going to be any trouble, I’ll just sit right here.”

“Oh, you’re very level-headed for such a little girl,” she replies, with a dry, crackling laugh. “Your mother did just buy some liquor, so I’ll let you stay for a bit. It would be awful if I kicked out a little girl who wasn’t feeling well and she had another accident, right? Take care of your shopping, ma’am, I’ll watch her for you.”

It seems that this woman is the proprietor of this liquor stall, from where my mother just bought the alcohol she used to revive me. The old man from the general store next door seems to have taken pity on me as well, and he waves me over.

“Come and wait over here, missy, that way nobody’ll come by and try to snatch ya...”

He motions me to a spot behind and between the two stalls and helps me sit down. It feels like the liquor that was poured down my throat is churning around inside me. Right now, moving around too much would be dangerous. If, for instance, I were to collapse from acute alcohol poisoning, nobody else would be able to figure out why.

While sitting down, I idly look over the contents of the two shops. The liquor stand seems to have received a new shipment of cider, just in time for its most popular season, and customers come one right after the other to buy little casks of it. The general store, on the other hand, doesn’t have nearly as many customers.

Just what does a general store sell in this world?

I look over the various goods that are lined up for sale, but for the most part I have no idea what I’m looking at.

“Mister, what’s thiiiis?” I ask, pointing at one of the random things on a nearby shelf. “Oh, have you not used one of these before, little missy? This

is what you use when you're weavin' cloth. Oh, and this one's used for huntin'."

Since he doesn't have any customers at the moment, the old man gladly explains what each thing does as I point at it in succession. There's so much stuff here that's used in daily life around here that I just don't know anything about. I dig through Maine's memories, but she either wasn't very interested in these things or she never really learned about them.

As I look around the items jumbled on the shelves in admiration, I notice something in the far corner. It may be just a single volume, but I definitely see the spine of some massive, bulky tome. It's the kind of binding that I'd usually only see behind a glass case in a library, with a leather cover and fine gold caps on each of the corners. It's so huge that I don't think I'd be able to even hold it.

...That's a book! That, don't tell me, that's a book, right?!

The instant I laid eyes on the spine of that book, color blasted back into my world. The heavy clouds that had weighed down on my mind were instantly driven away, and my very spirit was brightened in a moment.

"M... mister!! What's this?! What do you call this?!"

"Ahh, that's a book!"

Yessss! I finally found one! Books, they exist! It might just only be one, but they exist!

This book has scoured away my lingering depression from having been reborn into a world without any books. I tremble with emotion as I gaze longingly at its spine. It is absolutely too heavy for me to move, so it would merely be an ornament. From the looks of it, there's no way that it isn't prohibitively expensive, and there's no way that I'll be able to get my mother to buy it for me, no matter how much I pester her about it. However, if books like this exist, then there must be smaller, easier-to-carry books out there as well. I spin around to face the old man, eyes wide with raw hunger.

"Hey, mister, where can I find a store that sells books?"

“A store for books? There’s no store like that.” He gives me a what-the-hell-is-this-kid-talking-about look, and my excitement drops down a couple of notches. There’s books, so why are there no bookstores? “...Huh? Why? You’re selling one here.” “Books are only made when people transcribe them from the author’s original work, so they’re far too rare and valuable to just sell on the market. Even this one here ain’t actually for sale, it’s bein’ held as collateral for someone in the aristocracy. Well, if he don’t come back soon, I guess I’ll have to sell it, but the buyer’ll probably be another aristocrat.”

Aristocrats!! If I were actually following the reborn-into-a-parallel-universe trope, I would have been born into the nobility! I would be able to read! Why am I just a commoner?!

Thoughts of slaughtering the aristocracy flash through my mind. They’re surrounded by books from the minute they’re born. What have they done to deserve such a blessing?

“Little missy, is this the first book you’ve ever seen?”

I tear my eyes away from the book, nodding vigorously in reply to the old man’s question. Yes, this is the first book I’ve ever seen in this world. On top of that, they’re not usually for sale, and there’s no bookstores, and there’s a very good chance that such a chance encounter may never ever happen again. ...and, so!!

“M... mister!! Please, hear me out!”

With my fists clasped tightly together, I stand straight up, then fall to my knees in front of the shopkeeper. “What’s all this now?” he says, wide-eyed in surprise as I kneel before him.

This isn’t just an idle wish. What I need to demonstrate to this man is that this is the foundation at the heart of my foundation, and the most sincere demonstration in the world is begging on your hands and knees. I bow my head sharply, and do my best to explain my feelings as clearly and frankly as I can.

“It may be obvious that I cannot buy that book, but, at least, let me touch it! Let me rub my face against it! At the very least, let me sniff it, let me

breathe in the scent of its ink! Just that would be enough!!”

...The silence that filled the air after my heartfelt request was almost to painful to bear, yet the shopkeeper gave no reply. Timidly, I raise my head to look up at him. For some reason, he looks like he’s swallowed a bug, or maybe like he’s spotted some unbelievably disgusting pervert. Shock and disgust play across his face as he looks down at me.

Huh? Did my sincerity fail to shine through?

“I... don’t know if I’m really understandin’ what you mean, but... I think it might be dangerous for me to let you touch that.”

“B... but?!”

I start to reiterate my passionate request, but my time is apparently up.

“Maine, I’m done!” says my mother. “Let’s head home.”

“Mommy...”

Tears start falling from my eyes as soon as I hear her voice. The book’s right there, but I’ll never touch it. I’ll never smell it.

“What’s wrong, Maine?” she asks me, concerned. A dangerous look flashes across her face, and she spins around to face the shopkeeper. “What did you do to her?!” I jump between them and shake my head vigorously. “N... nothing! Nothing!” If I don’t clear this misunderstanding up immediately, then I’d be just heaping more problems on the kind old man who let me take shelter in his shop and taught me about books. That’s no way to return a favor.

“I don’t feel too good. Mommy, what did you make me drink? I’ve been feeling really funny since I woke up.”

“.....Ahhh, maybe the liquor I used to wake you up was a little too effective. Let’s get you home, get you some water, and get you a nice quiet place to rest. You’ll be all right.”

My mother nods her head in understanding, but it doesn’t look like she’s thinking at all about whether or not it was a bad idea to have given alcohol to a child in the first place. She takes my hand, and with a tug

starts pulling me back towards home. I look behind me as I walk away, and smile my biggest smile at the two shopkeepers.

“Thanks for letting me sit down!”

I didn't bow, like I'm accustomed to, but not because I'm emotionally compromised. Rather, I don't remember actually seeing anyone bowing their heads, so I don't think that's the custom here. For now, I'll just keep smiling. A great smile is indispensable when dealing with other people, and from the way they're smiling and waving back, it looks like my guess was correct.

“Maine, are you still feeling bad?” asks my mother. “...Yeah.”

We don't say very much as we trudge home, hand in hand. I look at the shops along our route home, and, of course, there aren't any bookstores. My goal for today of coercing my mother into getting me a children's book and maybe learning a few letters has ended in complete failure. Even though this city is home to the lord of the land, even though we are surrounded by such spectacular walls, there's no bookstore here. If books truly aren't for sale, even here, then there might not be a bookstore anywhere in the world.

I'm in despair. I had never thought that God could be so cruel as to force me, Urano Motosu, the book enthusiast who could go a day or two without eating as long as she had a book to read, to live a life bereft of books.

At least, why wasn't I born a noblewoman... Sniff! To reincarnate me as a peasant... God... what did I do to earn this hatred?

Even if I say that I want my parents to become nobility so that they can buy me books, those are just childish fantasies. I'd never say that I don't want to have been born into this family. Really, though, I want to be an aristocrat. If I can't be an aristocrat, I at least want enough money to be able to buy all the books out of a disgraced aristocrat's estate.

I may be stuck in this awful environment, but I know for a fact that no matter how hard I cry, it's not going to get me a book. If there aren't any bookstores, I can't buy a book.

So, how am I going to get one? I'm just going to have to make them myself, aren't I?

Really, what I truly want are books from this world, but that's an unreasonable luxury. In order to fulfill my most urgent desires, I'm going to have to put off learning how to read the language here. Instead, I'll make books in Japanese, which I already know.

I haven't yet figured out how I'm going to do all that, but that doesn't matter right now. I will definitely acquire a book!

Chapter 6: Interlude - My sister's gotten weird.

My name's Tory. I'm six years old. I have a little sister, Maine. She's five.

Maine has straight, dark blue hair, like the color of the night sky, and golden eyes that shine like the moon. I think she's really adorable, but I am her older sister.

The other day, Maine had a really bad fever. It was so bad that everyone in the family was worried, wondering if she would live or die. For three days, she didn't eat anything, and she even got so weak that she couldn't drink any water.

The fever might have made her a little strange in the head.

When she was sick, she started using words I didn't really understand and getting really mad all of a sudden. She always used to do what she was told, but when I went to go wash the dishes, she snuck out of bed and I found her crying and I don't know why. She spent the whole day crying...

I thought that maybe Maine was still suffering because of her fever, but when her fever went down, she got even weirder.

Seriously, she started saying that her body felt gross and that she wanted to wipe herself off. When we boil water to cook our food, she asks if she could have some warm water for a bath. Every day!

Every day, she wets a cloth and wipes her body off. "Help me with the parts I can't reach," she says, so I help her out. On the first day, the bath water got really dirty, but by the third day, it was still pretty clean.

"You're not really dirty, so isn't taking a bath kind of a waste?" I asked, but she just said, "It's not a waste, I am dirty!"

Every day, she obsesses over making sure she washes herself off. Before I knew it, one of the corners of the bedroom had turned into her bathing space.

Then, for some reason, she decided that I should start washing myself as

well when I was helping her. “Sure, why not,” I said, and started scrubbing my face. “You go outside a lot,” she said, “so you get dirtier than me.”

When I washed myself off, the water that Maine had left clean got really dirty and muddy. When I stared at all of the dirt that had been on me, I started feeling a little bit gross. Maine, though, was beaming. “If there’s two of us, it’s not a waste, right?” she said.

What will it take to make her see that it really is a waste? I have to bring all of that water up from the well, and it’s really hard! Doesn’t she know that?

After that, she suddenly started wearing her hair up. Her hair is really straight, so no matter how tightly we tie it back, it unties itself and comes down immediately, so we haven’t really been tying it back. After trying and failing to tie it back several times, Maine started to sulk. Suddenly, she got up and started rummaging around in our toy basket. She pulled out a doll that Dad had whittled out of wood and Mom had made clothes for... my most precious possession!

“Tory, can I break this off?” she asked. “That’s my doll’s leg! Maine, that’s awful!!”

It was terrifying that my little sister could so calmly ask to break off my doll’s leg. It was too cruel. When I got mad, she hung her head and mumbled “sorry”. Sighing, she ran her fingers through her hair, pushing her bangs back. Seeing a five-year-old do something so strangely sensual made my breath stop for a moment.

“Tory, if I wanted a stick like this, what should I do?”

What Maine really wanted wasn’t my doll’s leg, it was a wooden rod. So, I got a stick from the kindling pile. Instead of letting her break my doll, I used a knife to whittle the stick down into a little rod. She had a lot of requests, like “make this part a little skinnier” or “could you round the ends off to make them less sharp”, but eventually she was satisfied.

“Thanks, Tory!”

With a big smile, Maine took the rod from me, then suddenly jammed it

through her own head.

“Maine?!” I yelled, startled.

Maine started to turn the rod, which she had actually stuck through her hair, winding her hair tightly around it. Somehow, she put all of her hair up, with just that one little rod. I was surprised how firmly it stayed in place. It was like the magic the nobility uses! However, her hairstyle looked very adult.

“Maine,” I say, “you can’t put all of your hair up! Only grown-ups do that.”

“...Oh, really?”

With wide eyes, like she really didn’t know, she reached up and pulled the rod out of her hair. Immediately, her hair came undone and fell around her shoulders. Then, she grabs just the top part of her hair, and wraps it up like she did before.

“Is this okay?” she asks. “I think so, yeah!”

After that, Maine started to always wear her hair up like that. She looks like she has a stick through her head if you look at her from the front, but she seems happy with it.

A little while later, Mom was able to take a day off from work, and I was finally able to go out into the forest with everyone else. I gathered a lot of firewood, and was also able to find a lot of forest mushrooms, as well as some herbs that we can use to season the meat. We need to be preparing for the winter, so all of the kids are working hard to gather things.

“I’m home,” I say, as I walk through the door. “Welcome back, Tory,” replies Mom.

“What did you get? Show me, show me!” says Maine, digging around in my basket like this was a rare and unusual thing. I did this just the other day, but Maine... yeah, when I think about it, Maine’s being weird lately.

“Aha, this! Can I have this!”

With gleaming eyes, she pulls a melia fruit out of my basket. Maine

doesn't ask for things very often, so I thought it would be okay to give her two of them.

"Thanks, Tory!" she says, beaming like an angel. She runs off into the storage room, then comes back out, looking like everything in the world is absolutely perfect.

"Maine, why are y..."

As soon as I started to speak, Maine suddenly swung a hammer and, with a thud, smashed the melia. It splits apart with a squish, and the juice inside splatters all over my face.

"....."

"....."

When you smash it with a hammer, of course the juices are going to splatter everywhere, you know? Surely you know that without having to think about it, right?

"So, Maine. What are you doing?" I ask, trying to put on a smile as I wipe the splattered juice from my face. With a weird sort of "whee!" noise, she jumps up with a start.

"...Ummmm, so, yeah. I wanted some oil," she says, with a oh-no-now-I've-done-it sort of facial expression. She looks up at me, as if asking for help. This is definitely the face of a girl that absolutely didn't realize that smashing something with a hammer would send pieces flying everywhere.

"If you wanted oil, you know there's better ways to make it, right?! What are you doing?!"

"Oh, I see..." she says, dejectedly.

Is she really okay? Does she really not remember back when we pressed vais oil together? Oh no, maybe she had a fever for too long and she's gone funny in the head! ...I should ask Mom about this, shouldn't I?

Afterwards, when we were in the middle of cleaning up, Mom came back inside, carrying water from the well for our dinner. Of course, she got mad. This was all Maine's fault, but she got mad at both of us, because I wasn't

a very good older sister. Right then, Maine didn't seem very adorable at all.

"Tory, Tory," she asked, "How do you make oil? Teach me?"

Since Mom was in such a huff, Maine stealthily made her way over to me to ask her question. Her sneaking was completely visible. Look, Mom's watching us right now.

"Mom," I ask, "Can I teach Maine?" Mom sighs. "If we don't teach her, she's probably going to do something awful like this again." She points at the storage room. "Please, show her how to do it."

All of the tools we need to make oil are in the storage room, so I get a cloth and take Maine in there with me.

"...A wooden table like the one in the kitchen is just going to soak up the oils and juices, so we can't use that one. The metal table like here is better. First thing we need to do is spread a cloth out on the table. Then, we need to wrap the fruit in a cloth like this so that the pieces don't fly everywhere."

Melia fruit are edible, so we usually get the oil out of the seeds after we've finished eating. Maine, however, was very insistent that there's oil in the fruit, too.

She brought the hammer down with glee, over and over, but her aim wasn't very good, she wasn't very strong, and her posture was all wrong. She smashed up the fruit pretty well, but she wasn't able to smash any of the seeds. To make things worse, when we were done smashing up the seeds, we would need to wring the cloth out, and Maine doesn't have nearly enough strength to do that.

"Maine, that's not working. You're not smashing the seeds, you know?"

"Ooh... ...Toooryyyyyy..."

She looked up at me with such a pitiful expression that I decided to help out. I took the hammer from her, but it was so sticky and slippery with juice already that it nearly slipped from my hands. Sighing, I wiped off the handle, and gripped it tightly.

“This is how we do it...”

If Dad were doing this, he wouldn't be using a hammer. He'd get something really heavy to put on top of it and press the oil out of it without doing a whole lot of work. Boys are expected to do manual labor as they grow up, so they can lift heavy weights like that. I can't, though, so I had to smash those seeds one by one with a hammer.

“And now, we wring out the cloth...”

“Whoa! Tory, you're amazing!”

The oil drips into a small dish as I wring out the cloth. As Maine watches, the look of pure joy on her face is extremely adorable. My arms, however, extremely hurt.

“Thanks, Tory!” she says. “Hey, don't run off, help me clean up!”

Maine seemed confused, like she didn't quite know what to do to help, so I helped show her how to clean up all of the tools we used.

Maine has a weak constitution and is much shorter than other kids her age, so it's easy to forget that she's already five. When she turns seven, she'll be baptized at the temple, and she'll have to find someplace to start an apprenticeship.

Not only that, but next year I'm going to be turning seven. I'm going to start my apprenticeship, so Maine's going to have to be able to do half of the housework by then. She doesn't even know where the tools go or how to clean them right now, so I don't know if she's going to be okay.

We're going to keep an eye on her health, but we have to gradually start making her help out with the housework. Otherwise, Maine as she is right now isn't really going to be able to find work. Mom's going to have to stop pampering her, and I, her big sister, am going to have to teach her everything she needs to know.

“Tory,” said Maine, “Can I have some herbs too?”

“Just a little?” “Yeah!”

With a serious face, Maine went through the herbs she took from my

basket, sniffing them each and adding a few of them to her oil. She's probably trying to change the scent of it, but some of the herbs she's using are used to keep bugs away, and they'll make it too smelly to eat.

Whoa... shouldn't I get this into our food before that finishes happening?

I immediately started to try to add the melia oil to the pot, but Maine cut me off with a frantic expression.

"Tory, no! What are you doing?!"

"If we don't eat this soon," I said, "we won't be able to use it at all! These herbs are going to change the flavor so much that we're not going to be able to eat it, you know?" "No, don't eat it!"

No matter what I said, Maine just kept shaking her head and trying to hide the bowl the oil was in. Eventually, Mom got bothered enough that she looked over at what we were doing, and she started getting angry as well.

"Maine!" she yelled. "Those are things that Tory went and gathered! Don't be selfish!"

"I'm not selfish! Tory gave these to me!"

No matter how mad Mom got, Maine still wouldn't listen. When even the two of us couldn't make her change her mind, we finally gave up, and Maine went off to wash herself off as usual.

Then, she suddenly dumped about half of the oil into her bath water and started mixing it up! Now we really couldn't eat it. And I'd spent so much trouble finding those, too!

"Maine! What are you doing!"

"Eh? I'm washing, you know?"

I couldn't understand what Maine was doing, even when she tried to tell me. Lately, this has been happening more and more. As I watched, dumbfounded, Maine soaked her hair in the bucket and started to wash it. She splashed the part soaking in the water around, then started repeatedly

scrubbing at the top of her head. When she seemed satisfied, she tightly wrung out all of the excess water out of her hair, then used a cloth to start drying it. When she was finished, she combed it out straight.

Her deep blue hair was suddenly so much smoother and silkier that it was positively radiant.

“Do you want to use it to, Tory? If both of us use it, it won’t be a waste!”

After seeing how beautiful Maine had suddenly become, I kind of wanted to try it. I wanted to try being that beautiful.

However, I had been so mad at her just a little while ago that I felt awkward using it. Though, when Maine reminded me that I was the one who’d found the melia and pressed it for oil, the awkwardness blew away.

When you think about it like that, didn’t I do literally all of the preparation work?

Hesitantly, I undid my braid, then lowered my hair into the bucket and washed it like Maine had done. Maine helped too, and her tiny hands helped to wash the parts I missed.

“I think it’s good now?”

After drying it a bunch and combing it out, my hair was as glossy as Maine’s. Although it had always been really poofy and frizzy and impossible to comb out, now it was gentle and wavy. It’s almost like magic.

“You’re so beautiful!” says Maine. “Tory, you smell nice.”

She seems pleased, for some reason, as she combs out my hair. I was delighted that I’d become so beautiful... but, how did Maine learn how to do this?

Maine really has gotten weird. If she gets weirder like this every time she has a fever... that’s a terrifying thought.

...Although, when Mom freaked out when she saw us as we cleaned up Maine’s bucket, I started wondering what Maine would get up to next. I might be looking forward to it, just a little.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Urano originally called this a “簡易ちゃんリンシャン”, which is a reference to an older commercial for a 2-in-1 shampoo.

Chapter 7: Neighborhood Boys

Since I don't have any books, I'll make some myself.

Well, where the heck do I go to buy paper? The old man at the general store said that you have to copy books by hand if you want them, so I think there might be blank books available for sale. Although, where the heck do I find those? Perhaps there's a store that deals exclusively in paper.

If I were in Japan, I'd be done in an instant. I'd write everything out on loose-leaf in a binder, or in a notebook, or on stapled-together printer paper. Here, though, there's no end to my problems.

There isn't any paper in the house, so I'm going to need to start searching for some if I want to have any chance of making a book. My mother went to work this morning, so right now at home there's just Tory and me. Of course, this means there's only one person around to interrogate.

"Tory," I ask, "Do you know where to buy 'paper'?"

"Hm? What did you say?" she replies. "'Paper'! Where do I go to... oh!"

Tory looks at me quizzically, her braided hair swinging as she tilts her head to one side. This is the face of someone who doesn't understand the Japanese word I just used.

Not good. I don't know how to say "paper" in this language. Argh! I really should have asked the old guy at the general store what it was called!

"...you wouldn't know, huh?"

"Sorry, Maine," says Tory, "I guess I don't. That's a funny word, though."

I hang my head with a dramatic jerk, and let out a deep sigh. The truth is, not knowing where to buy paper is just one of my problems. I also have no idea where to find pencils or pens. Based on what I've seen of this city, I doubt anything like a mechanical pencil or a ballpoint exists. Even fountain pens might be unlikely.

Well then, what should I use a writing implement? And, of course, where should I go to find it? And, above all, I'm certainly not able to go out, by myself, in order to buy all of these materials. This really is troublesome.

"Ah!" exclaims Tory, from the kitchen. "Dad forgot this!"

I make my way over to the kitchen, where Tory is holding a bundle.

Sure enough, this looks like the thing from this morning, where our father had suddenly said "I need that thing for work, can you get it out for me" and our mother had gotten mad and shot back "why didn't you ask me earlier", then she frantically tore apart the storage room looking for it. Thinking about how mad she would be if she were to find out that our father had then forgotten that thing sends shivers down my spine.

"Tory, Mommy's going to be mad, right?"

"You think so too, Maine?"

I don't know if it's this family or this world, but people here are very forthright about their emotions. When they laugh, it's with a booming voice and an idiotic grin, and when they're mad, they burn like a raging fire. In other words, my mother's explosive anger is terrifying.

"Tory, should we take this to Daddy?" I ask. "...Ummm, well, leaving you alone is, uh..."

When she had stepped outside for just a moment to wash the dishes, I snuck out of the bedroom and then cried my eyes out. When I had gone out shopping with our mother, I fainted and collapsed in a heap. My family's estimation of me is probably scraping rock bottom, so Tory probably isn't going to let me out of her sight.

"If Daddy doesn't have this he'll be in trouble, right?"

"...Maine, are you able to walk all the way to the gates?"

Rather than leaving me alone, it looks like we're going to go out together. Thinking of the distance between here and the town market makes me a little bit uneasy, but my mother's wrath is far more terrifying. I clench my fist and put on my bravest face.

“I’ll... I’ll do it!” I say. “Well, let’s go, then.”

Package in hand, we depart, bundled up in our countless layers of clothing. Although we may be wearing many layers, we are not at all fashionable in the slightest. This is entirely for protection from the cold.

By the way, my selection of clothing includes two pairs of underwear, two woolen one-piece dresses, one knitted woolen sweater, two pairs of knit pants that are kind of like long johns, and two pairs of socks, also knitted out of wool. I am wearing every single piece of it.

“Tory, isn’t this too heavy to move in?” I had asked, while we were bundling up. “If we don’t wear it all, though, the wind’s going to break in through the patches and seams, you know? You catch cold super easily too, so you definitely have to wear everything.”

There had been no arguing with my mother when she made me do this, but I briefly entertained the notion that maybe I’d be able to push back against Tory. She, however, was adamant that I dress appropriately to keep myself healthy. I surrendered to her strong sense of responsibility and put everything on. Thanks to that, it’s very hard to move right now.

Tory is really fit, so even though she’s bundled up just as tightly as I am, she’s as nimble as she usually is. To make things worse, she’s always going out to collect firewood with the other children and run errands for our mother, so she’s used to walking around a lot. I, on the other hand, am neither strong nor fast. And I’m wearing a ton of clothing.

“Maine, are you alright?”

“Haaah... haaah...” I pant, “If we go... a little slower... I’ll be fine.”

Just like last time, I’m out of breath after climbing down all those stairs. I walk at my own pace. If I push it too hard and collapse, I’m just going to burden Tory even more. It’s important for me to start building her trust in me back up.

Even so, walking on cobblestones is haaaard...

They’re extremely uneven, so if you aren’t paying too much attention to where you step, your foot will get caught and you’ll fall on your face. I hold

onto Tory's hand, letting her do the navigating while I concentrate on putting my feet in the right place.

From a little ways away, a boy's voice rings out. "Oh hey, it's Tory! What are you up to?"

I raise my head. Three boys, wearing wooden backpacks and carrying bows, come running up to us. With red, blond, and pink hair, the trio is certainly eye-catchingly colorful.

Their clothing might have originally been dyed, but years of dirt and food stains have made them a mottled gray. They seem like hand-me-downs, covered in patches. It's not that different than what I'm wearing, so their standard of living is probably the same as ours.

"Ah, Ralph! And Lutz and Fey too!"

Since Tory seems so friendly with these three, it's likely that Maine has some sort of connection to them as well. I scrunch up my forehead in concentration, digging through Maine's memories.

Ah, yep, there it is. Oh, they're the neighborhood kids.

Ralph, same age as Tory. He's redheaded and is the strongest. The leader of the kids, gives off an atmosphere as if he's everyone's big brother. Fey, also the same age as Tory. Pink-haired, with the kind of mischievous face you'd see on the worst kind of prankster. He and Maine never got very close, maybe because of the differences in their constitution, so she doesn't have very many memories of him. Lutz, Ralph's younger brother and the same age as me. He tries to act like he's my older brother, but he comes across like a cute little boy that wants to grow up.

The three of them seem to be part of Tory's usual party when she heads off to the forest, and it seems like they sometimes brought Maine along with them. The memories of those few outings seem much clearer than Maine's other memories.

While my focus was turned inward as I dug through my memory, Tory had struck up a lively conversation with Ralph.

"My dad forgot something, so we're going to the gates to bring it to him,"

she says. "You guys going to the forest?"

"Yeah. Wanna go to the gate together?" "Sure!"

When I see how her face lights up as she talks to Ralph, I realize how much trouble I'm putting her through every day. Of course heading off to the forest with your friends is way more fun than babysitting, isn't it? I'm sorry for being such a drag of a little sister. Although, my fever has been down for a few days, so it should be okay for me to start going out again. Specifically, to go out and find a store that will sell me some paper.

When the other kids had just joined up with us, they'd started going at my speed, but Tory suddenly sped up. Since we're holding hands, I'm pulled along with her. Quickly, my feet get tangled together.

"Whoaaaaa!"

"Maine?!" Tory immediately stops moving, so I don't fall flat on my face, but I do scrape my knee. "I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" "...Yeah."

My knee doesn't hurt very much, but now that I've sat down, standing up seems so hard. I just want to rest a little. As I think about how oppressive this situation is, Lutz offers me his hand.

"...Hey, Maine. Want to ride on my pack?"

Lutz, you're such a good kid!

According to Maine's memories, Ralph and Fey are always acting like they're better than Lutz, so even though he's the same age as Maine, he tries to act like her older brother, especially because she's so small and weak. Whenever she started getting too exhausted, he'd take her pack so she could keep going. What a gentleman!

On top of that, his blond hair is a color that I'm actually used to seeing, unlike pink or green, which is comforting.

"Maine, are you getting another fever? If it's getting too hard, I can carry you."

Lutz seems so happy. Seriously, he does! However, even though he's bigger than me, we're still the same age, so having him carry me on his

back might be kind of bad...

As I worry about what I should do, Ralph sighs a little, then puts down his backpack.

“Lutz,” he says, “if you’re carrying her, it’ll take us forever to get to the forest. I’ll carry Maine. Lutz, you take my bow, Fey, you take my backpack.”

“Ralph...”

Lutz scowls resentfully at Ralph. He must feel like his good deed was just snatched away from him.

I grab his hand tightly. “You were the first to help me, Lutz,” I say, smiling broadly. “You’re so kind. Thanks! You made me happy.”

Being praised for noticing me seems to be enough for Lutz. He smiles shyly, and takes Ralph’s bow without complaint.

If you praise a child for being kind, they’ll keep that kindness with them as they grow up. I’m speaking, of course, from my adult perspective.

“Hey, come here,” says Ralph, beckoning. “Okay! Thanks, Ralph,” I reply.

Ralph is just a little bit bigger than Tory. I lean my weight against his back. There’s no need here for the shyness of a little girl. No need at all. With me riding securely on his back, Ralph starts walking at a steady pace.

My field of view is about thirty to forty centimeters higher than it usually is, and the world looks so different from up here. Or, more precisely, I don’t have to keep my eyes on the ground to avoid tripping, so I can actually look around freely. On top of that, Ralph doesn’t have to slow down to match my usual pace, so the scenery is flowing by at a steady rate.

“Whoa, I’m so high!” I exclaim. “So fast, too!”

“Don’t get too excited, okay?” he says. “You’ll get sick again.” “Yeah! I’ll be careful.”

Eh heh heh, being a frail little girl has its advantages~! Even better, boys who keep going to the forest to get firewood are pretty strong. He’s got way more muscle than you’d expect from a kid.

If I compare these people to my recollection of what Japanese elementary schoolers are like, there is a significant difference in physique. This might not be a fair comparison, though; not only is the lifestyle very different, but these people are of a different race.

Another thing I shouldn't be comparing to Japan is the scenery. Thin streams of filth ooze out from the narrow alleys, and the pack mules that wander up and down the main street are walking through piles of their own shit...

It's... it's not like I've been specifically staring at the filth! This is just the kind of spectacle that you'd never see in Japan, so I was a little surprised, so of course my eyes were drawn to it!

Unlike when I had gone out to the town market, the streets are filled with people going to work, so I can't see into any of the first-floor shops as we go past. The shops that deal only in commodities have glass windows, but from here, all I can see are the signs hung above the doors. To make things worse, all of the buildings along the street are of similar color and design, so my eyes are, of course, drawn to anything that stands out in the slightest. It's not my fault!

"You okay, Ralph?" asks Tory, looking a little concerned. "Maine isn't too heavy?"

Ralph shifts me around slightly with a jolt, securing his grip. He turns his head away a little. "I said it was okay," he says, curtly. "Maine's really tiny, and she's light. If we let her walk, wouldn't it trouble you more?"

I can sympathize with the shy expression on Tory's troubled face, and I want to help her out. Aren't you supposed to be thanking her right now?

...Oh ho! Ralph's just a boy! Perhaps he's interested in Tory? He's trying to use me to get into her heart. I don't particularly mind, though. Alright, let's make this puppy love happen!

...Of course, this is just my particular delusion. The both of them are still very young, so they probably aren't able to really feel true love... but I have no books to keep me busy, so at least let me have my fantasies.

Then, Ralph suddenly says “Tory, you smell... nice,” acting so smooth as he smells her hair. What the hell, kid, do you think you’re the hero of a YA romance novel? Then, of course, Tory blushes shyly and says “Really? Thanks...”

I may not have very many bittersweet experiences under my own belt, even at 22, but Tory is so ridiculously sweet at six years old that it’s only natural for me to have these sorts of thoughts, right?

I never used to pay it any mind when people told me that I’d never have any sort of male presence in my life if I just stayed in my dream world, reading my books and lost in my fantasies. It wasn’t just my family telling me this; even Shuu from next door kept saying it. None of your business! Idiots. Idiots!

While I was distracted by my irritating memories of Japan, Ralph and Tory’s puppy love has blossomed into a proper reverse harem, with Tory in the middle.

“Oh, yeah! It does smell good!”

“What? What?”

Fey and Lutz have also moved in on Tory, smelling her braided hair. They’re all about the same age, so this is definitely a reverse harem.

“Whoa, your hair is super glossy!”

“What did you do to it?”

Eh heh heh. That’s right, that’s right!

Satisfied with the surprised reactions of the reverse harem’s members, I nod approvingly from my vantage point on Ralph’s back. I’ve keeping a potpourri of dried flowers in our clothing box, boiling water at dinner time so that Tory and I can give ourselves sponge baths, washing our hair with herb oils and carefully brushing it out, and, bit by bit, bringing up the level of hygiene in our house.

It looks like my efforts are finally starting to pay off!

Incidentally, Ralph and co. are a little bit on the smelly side. Everything

around here stinks, so I've somewhat gotten used to it, but things that stink still stink. Although I'd never say it out loud, from my position on Ralph's back, I can definitely say that he stinks.

I really want to make everyone start washing with soap. The only soap kept at home is a foul-smelling animal-based soap that's used for cleaning and doing laundry. Nobody has any nice-smelling vegetable-based soaps to wash themselves with, which is terrible.

Aaaah, even just hand soap would be nice...

As I spaced out, lost in my own thoughts, Lutz suddenly tugs on my hair, sniffing it like he did to Tory's. "Maine, you smell good too! I can see your face really well with your hair up like that too, you look really cute."

He gazes innocently at me with his pale green eyes.

Not good! Lutz, your color scheme is too good! Blond hair and green eyes, that's the recipe for a really hot dude!

Nooooooooo! My opponent is a child, why am I suddenly so shy?! I know he has zero intentions, but the framing of this scene is just too awkward! Please, stop! I should be old enough to know better, but I have no experience with these things! I can't cope!!

I'm the only one here who's trying to keep their heart from doing backflips. Everyone else is already talking about the things they're going to find in the forest or when they think the first snowfall of the season will come. Ignoring how I'm about to faint, Lutz is bragging about how much better he's gotten at shooting his bow lately. Unlike Tory, who's shyly thanking everyone for their help, I can barely say a word. My heart is pounding again.

For five and six year olds to do this stuff so calmly, is this normal?! What's with this world! What's a humble, shy, pure girl to do? Will my heart be stained by evil?

...Don't you dare ask who I was calling a pure girl!

Chapter 8: Paper - Impossible to acquire.

As I cling to Ralph's back, my legs dangling, the gates of the outer wall come into view.

The gate ahead is the south gate, and I can see several soldiers standing there. One of them is probably my father. I can't tell which one is him, but it looks like Tory knows. She clutches the bundle close to her chest, and runs forward, waving her arm.

"Father!" she calls. Our father looks surprised. "Tory, what's the matter?"

"You left something at the house!" says Tory, beaming as she hands over the bundle. "We came to bring it to you."

Tory, you're so kind. You're too kind! If it were me talking to my previous father, I wouldn't have said anything nearly so kind. My true feelings would probably have slipped out, something like "Mom would be pissed if she found out you'd left this at the house, and that would be a huge bother. Did you forget what happened this morning?"

"Ahh, I'm saved!" he says, reaching out to take the bundle with a sigh of relief. "...Hm? Did you leave Maine by herself?!"

Father scowls. It seems that he hadn't noticed anyone except for his beloved daughter Tory, so he had completely ignored Ralph's group and missed me, his other beloved daughter, clinging to Ralph's back. Tory shakes her head vigorously, and points over at Ralph.

"Nuh uh, she came too! Look, she's riding on Ralph's back."

"Huh? Oh! I see." He glances around, feeling a little embarrassed that he hadn't noticed us, then pats Ralph on the head. "Sorry you had to carry her all this way, Ralph." "We were going to the forest, so it was on our way," says Ralph, looking a little bothered by how my father is ruffling his hair. He sets me down, then goes to collect the stuff that Fey and Lutz were holding for him.

"Thanks, Ralph," says my father. "Lutz and Fey, you too."

We see off Ralph and his friends as they head through the gate on their

way to the forest, then Tory and I head to the gate's waiting room. The wall here is thick enough that you could probably put a three meter by four meter room¹ in it. This room isn't nearly that large, so it looks like there's both a waiting room and a room for the night watch in here. The waiting room is very simple, with a table, a few chairs, and a cabinet.

I look around excitedly, feeling like I'm visiting a foreign country for the first time. After a little while, one of my father's coworkers brings us some water.

"You two are such good kids, bringing your dad something he forgot."

It took us about twenty minutes, going at Tory's pace, to get from our home to the gate, so I'm incredibly grateful to finally get some water. I gulp back all of the water in the wooden cup I've been given, then let out a huge sigh.

"Ahhh, delicious! I've been revived!"

"Maine," says Tory with a frown, "didn't you barely walk at all?"

At those words, everyone starts laughing. I try to look upset, but I really can't object since everyone saw Ralph carrying me in. I help myself to another cup of water as everyone laughs at me.

Another soldier enters the room. He grabs a wooden box, which seems to be some kind of toolbox, from the shelves, then immediately heads back out. Unintentionally, I frown a little at how hectic things seem to be.

"Daddy," I ask, "Did something happen?"

"It's probably just someone who needs special attention coming through the gates. Nothing to worry about."

My father may be waving his hand dismissively while saying not to pay it any mind, but I can't help but worry a little when I see a busy situation like that. Are things really okay?

I mean, this is a gate. The gatekeepers are riled up, you know? Isn't this a danger flag?

In contrast to my worries, Tory is just sitting there, looking like there's

no danger at all, with her head tilted to one side. “What kind of person needs special attention?” she asks. “Have I seen them before?”

It looks like Tory can’t think of anyone who would rile up the guards like this, even though she travels through this gate fairly often. Our father rubs thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin for a moment before answering.

“Uhhh, perhaps its someone who looks like a bad person who committed a crime. Or, maybe, it’s an arriving aristocrat that we need to inform the lord about.”

“Oh...”

If he says that someone looks like a criminal, then it seems like they pass judgement just based on how someone looks. Although, if I think about how things work around here, it seems unlikely that they have any real way to transmit information around, so they probably have no choice but to stop and investigate every suspicious-looking individual.

“We’ll have them wait in another room while the higher-ups decide if it’s okay to let them into the city.”

Ahh, so that means that there must be several waiting rooms around the gate. I get it now. Surely, there must be significant differences between the rooms for the nobility and rooms for criminals, from the size of them to the quality of the furniture. Life’s unfair, no matter what world you’re in.

While I contemplate these things, the young soldier returns, bringing back the wooden box as well as some sort of cylindrical, pipe-like item. There wasn’t even a trace of any tension on his face, like you’d expect from an emergency situation. Looks like my father was right, this is no big deal.

The soldier, with cargo in his left hand, walks up to my father, raises his right fist, then thumps the left side of his chest twice. My father stands up, straightens himself, and returns the gesture. This is probably this world’s salute.

“Otto, I’ll leave the report to you,” says my father, with a stern, commanding expression that I’ve never seen at home.

“Ohh,” I murmur, appreciatively. I haven’t seen him do anything but laze around, so this is really fresh. His expression is sharp, and he actually looks really cool.

“Count Lowenwalt wishes for the rampart gates to be opened, sir,” says Otto. “His seal?”

“Has been verified, sir.” “Right, he can pass.”

Otto salutes once more, then sits down in the chair across from me. He sets the wooden box down on the table next to him, then uses both hands to spread the other thing out. It isn’t as smooth as paper, and it has some sort of smell to it, but my eyes snap to it immediately.

Parchment?!

I don’t know if it really is parchment, but it definitely is some kind of paper that has properties like it was made out of animal skin. I can’t read anything it says, but there are words written there using the alphabet of this world. Before my staring eyes, Otto takes from the box an inkwell and a reed pen, then starts to write something down on the parchment.

Whooooooooooooa!! Writing! There is a person who can write here!! This is the first civilized man I have met in this world. I absolutely want him to teach me how to read this language!

As I think, my gaze is fixed on Otto’s hands as if I were going to devour them. My dad places a hand on my head and ruffles my hair. “What is it?” he asks.

I look up at my father, then point at the parchment-looking thing. If I don’t figure out what it’s called, I won’t be able to ask about it in the future. “Daddy, Daddy! What’s that?” I ask. “Ah, that’s parchment!” he says. “It’s a paper made from the skin of goats or sheep.”

“What’s this black stuff?” “That’s ink, and that’s a pen.”

As I thought! I’ve found paper and ink, so I can make books. I’m so happy that I could start dancing, but I try to stay calm. I clasp my hands tightly in front of me, look endearingly up at my father, and start begging with all my might.

“Hey, Daddy. Can I have that?”

“No, Maine, that’s not a kid’s toy.”

Even though I’d tried to project every last mote of adorable little girl charm, he rejected my pleas immediately. Of course, just because I’ve been shot down, doesn’t mean I’m not going to stop trying.

When it comes to books, I clamp down on them like a snapping turtle and stick to them like gum on a shoe. You really shouldn’t underestimate my adhesion!

“I wanna write like this! I really do. Pleeese!”

“You just can’t, Maine! You don’t even know how to write.”

Certainly, if you don’t know how to write, then you don’t need any paper or ink. For this very reason, now’s my greatest chance to twist my father’s words back around.

“Ah, I’ll learn if you teach me! If I learn, then can I have that?”

The younger, lower-ranked soldier can write, so it’s likely that my father, who seems to be his superior, can write as well. I never would have thought that someone who knew how to write would live in a house without a single sheet of paper, but I’m happy to have been proven wrong. If my father can teach me how to read and write, then reading the books of this world is no longer an impossible dream.

As I sit there with a huge smile plastered over my face, feeling like I’ve gotten one step closer to realizing my ambitions, someone lets out a muffled snort. I look around, trying to find the source, and see Otto barely holding in his laughter, as if our father-daughter conversations about pen and ink are almost too much to bear.

“Ahahaha, ‘teach me’, she says... heh heh, sir, aren’t you pretty bad at writing?”

With a sharp snap, cracks spiderwebbed throughout my ambition. My smile freezes on my face, like someone’s dumped a bucket of ice water all over me.

“Huh? Daddy, can you not write?”

“I can read, more-or-less, and write too. My job involves paperwork, so I need to know how to read, but I’ve never really needed to know any characters outside of the ones I use at work. Just enough so that I can write down the names of people who come from far away, after I hear them.”²

“Ohhh...,” I sigh, staring at my father with a sullen expression on my face as he makes his excuses. So, it seems that my father’s literacy level is such that he’s only got a basic grasp of the alphabet to the point where if his class assignment was to write out his friend’s names then he could. The young Otto, though, said “pretty bad”, so he must be on the level of a first grader, who’d still make some mistakes with his classmate’s names. To be frank: worthless.

“Hey now, don’t look at your father like that!” says Otto, the person who caused my opinion of my father to drop so dramatically, with a nervous look on his face as he scolds me. Then, as if he’s covering for my father, he starts to explain the duties of a soldier.

“The job of a soldier is to keep the peace in the town, but when there’s big events that the nobility put on, the knights usually are the ones who get the written instructions, and for smaller events all of the coordination is done verbally. We don’t really see a lot of different characters. Just being able to write people’s names is enough.”

My father had a chance to pull himself together while Otto was covering for him, and has pulled his pride back together. It seems like my unimpressed stare hurt his feelings unexpectedly much.

“Barely anyone knows how to read amongst the peasantry, except for the village leaders. I’m pretty amazing already, you know!” he says, his chest puffed out. “Whoa, you really are amazing, Daddy! Can I have this? Pleeeeeease?”

You’re amazing, Daddy, so you want to give your beloved daughter with a hundred sheets of paper as a present, with fanfare. I stare into his eyes as I layer on the extortion, but he wavers a little and retreats a step.

“.....One page would make an entire month’s wages disappear, so giving it to a kid...”

What did you say?! An entire month’s wages?! Wh... how much could parchment cost?! This... even though I’m not a child, this is not the kind of thing that you should dangle just out of my reach!

The reason why there’s no paper in the house, the reason why there’s no bookstores in this town, they’re all the same. The price just isn’t one that us commoners can afford to pay. No matter how much I beg for paper, my family barely makes enough money to keep us fed. Nobody’s going to buy me paper.

I drop my shoulders, a defeated look on my face. Otto pats me gently on the head, trying to cheer me up.

“Paper’s not the kind of thing you can find in stores that commoners can enter, anyway. It’s the kind of thing that’s only used by the nobility and the people they work with, like important merchants and government officials, so it’s not something that kids can use anyway. If you want to learn how to write, why not use a slate? How about I give you the one I used to use when I was just learning?”

“Really? That would be great!”

I immediately nod, and graciously make arrangements to get the slate. I’ve waited so long, and I really want to learn how to write too, so I’m going to figure out how to press Otto into serving as my teacher.

“Thanks, Mr. Otto! Please, could you teach me how to write? I’m counting on you!”

As I pressure Otto with my adorable smile, my father looks back and forth between the two of us with a pitiful expression on his face, but I’m not paying attention.

Being able to practice writing, getting a slate to write on, these things are enough to set my heart soaring, but what I truly want, books, require paper. After all, you can’t preserve anything on a slate. A slate is something that you write on and erase many times, like a chalkboard. It’s

great for practicing how to write, but you can't use it as a book.

It hadn't even crossed my mind that paper might be something that just wasn't sold to commoners. Hmm, how can I make any books if I don't have any paper? If I can't just acquire any paper, what should I do? What can I do?

Can't I just make it myself?

Before I make any books, I'm going to need to start by making my own paper. However, making paper really isn't all that simple. I don't think it's the kind of thing that I can just pass off as a kid playing around.

Grr, the road to books is long!!

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. She describes the possible dimension of the room as "six-tatami", referring to a standardized room layout that's 270 cm by 360 cm. A Western audience needs this explained, but reading off those numbers would be oddly specific, so I rounded up to 3 meters by 4 meters.

2. It seems as though the writing system is based off of Japanese (no surprise), which has both a phonetic alphabet, where characters correspond to generic sounds, and a logographic alphabet, where specific characters mean specific things with specific readings. Knowing enough to write someone's name down means that Maine's father knows the phonetic alphabet, so he can write things that he hears, but doesn't know how to "spell" them correctly with the right logograms. (For a more Western example, imagine having to write down Arnold Schwarzenegger's name having only heard it once. Then imagine that everyone's names are that hard to spell.)

Chapter 9: Respect for Ancient Egypt

To make that just one page, a hide has to be stripped, all of the fur shaved off, and then from the largest usable part of a single animal's hide, sheets must be cut that are of a size that's easy to work with. The page that I saw at my father's workplace was about the size of an A4 sheet of paper². If I were to cut up a single page of parchment, I wouldn't get more than about five to eight usable pages. To put it plainly, it's so expensive that there's no way a commoner like me could possibly buy enough to write a book.

So, if I'm going to make a book, I need to make some paper.

However, I know nothing about how to actually make paper other than what I've read in books. After all, paper has always been something that I could just go to a store and buy. I could go into any drugstore and find loose-leaf paper and notebooks with the rest of the school supplies. I lived in a world where people would just hand out little notepads on the street as promotional items. Banks gave out free calendars, and my mailbox was stuffed full of unwanted flyers that went straight into the trash.

If I had one of those unwanted flyers now, I'd read every last word on it, and treasure every centimeter of the margin. A world where paper can be obtained so easily is such a luxurious one. Viva, Japan! If I were to be reborn someday, Japan would be nice.

To make things worse, there aren't any machines here for making paper! If I don't have a machine to help me, the entire process is going to have to be done entirely through my own manual labor.

You must be thinking that the solution to my problems is so obvious, now that I've been reborn in an alternate world without machines. I read a lot of books, you're thinking, so I have a lot of knowledge that I can use, right? ...Please, think about it for a little bit.

All I ever wanted to do was read, and I thought that even using electrical appliances to do the daily chores was too much work. You think that such a worthless Japanese woman could suddenly start doing all the manual

labor required to make paper by hand? On top of that, my current body is a child, with a weak constitution, who simply can't do some things, isn't allowed to do others, and is otherwise extremely restricted in action.

In conclusion: there's no way in hell.

However, it's too early to give up. Throughout the world's history, businesses and governments have needed to keep records. This goes back to ancient times, but machine-made paper certainly isn't that old. In other words, I might be able to take the ancient methods used in ancient times and reproduce them here and now.

Hmmm, what did they do before they had machines?

I scrunch up my eyebrows and open my tiny five-year-old's hands (more like three-year-old's because of my tiny physique) as far as they can go, concentrating hard.

Ancient civilizations, ancient civilizations... If you're talking about ancient civilizations, Ancient Egypt is first on the list! And, if you're talking about Ancient Egypt, you have to talk about papyrus! Three cheers for Ancient Egypt!

Thanks to that word-association game, I've hit upon the idea of making Papyrus like the Ancient Egyptians did. If it's something they invented in ancient history, I should be able to do it myself, somehow, even with my tiny hands.

I think that they made it out of some kind of plant, like a straight tree or tall grass... probably. Here, there are plenty of plants. I'm positive that I could find plants suitable for making paper scattered around the forest.

Yeah, the forest. Let's go to the forest.

Whenever it came to books, I'd always happily do whatever impossible legwork I needed to do. My family, and even little Shu always looked on with wonder, then sighed in lament. So, now that I've got this idea, I want to implement it immediately. I try begging Tory to take me with her to the forest.

"Tory, I wanna go to the forest too! Can I go w—"

“Eh?! You?! No way!”

She shot me down before I even had a chance to finish talking. She reacted so fast that it was obvious she hadn't even had to think twice. On top of that, she said “no way”, not “you shouldn't”, which implied that there wasn't any room for me to change her mind, which really hurt.

“Why not?”

“You couldn't make it there, you know?” she says, then starts counting the reasons off on her fingers. “If you can't make it to the gates, you absolutely can't make it all the way to the forest. And when we go to the forest, we're going to gather firewood, fruits, and nuts, right? You really can't take it easy out there. Also, can you even climb a tree? And when we're coming back, would you be able to carry a big, heavy box on your back while you walk? If we wanted to make it back before the gates closed for the day, we wouldn't be able to take any breaks on the way back. There's no way you can do it, see?”

The list is a little long, but it essentially all boils down to “you're not strong enough”.

“Also,” she says, “it's almost winter, so there aren't really many things we can find in the forest right now...”

Even if I were to make it, there isn't really anything to harvest, she's saying.

This is really tough. Do I go to the forest even though there might not be anything to harvest, or do I give up on making paper? This decision is way too tough.

Tory notices the deep look of worry on my face. “What do you want to get?” she asks, tilting her head to one side. “There's not going to be many melia fruits left, you know.”

Melia fruits are what I've been making our simple shampoo out of. We haven't been eating the fruits Tory brings back; instead, we've been extracting all of the oil from them and storing it. Then, occasionally, we use it as a moisturizer for our hair.

I'd be happy to get more melia, but the important thing here is not beauty, it's books. I need plant fibers to use as raw materials for my pseudo-papyrus.

"Ummm... are there any 'plants whose fibers can be easily extracted'?"

"Eh? What?"

Tory has a dubious look on her face, so I repeat myself. That's definitely the face of someone who did not understand my Japanese. I think for a moment, then try to explain it again using very easy-to-understand words.

"...I need grass with a straight, fat stalk. I just want the stalk."

"Hmmm..." Tory ponders my question. Does she have some kind of idea? I watch her intently as I wait for a reply. After a little while, she shrugs her shoulders with a resigned look on her face.

"Sure, I'll try asking Ralph and Lutz for help."

"Huh?" She didn't say she was going to do it for me, but she said she'd try?

I don't quite understand what she's getting at, and I tilt my head to one side. Tory seems a little surprised by my reaction. I blink a few times, my head tilted confusedly, as if to ask her what she said just now.

"Ralph's family raises chickens, you know? They need a lot of feed to make it through the winter."

Uh, even if you say "you know," I didn't actually know that. Tory's saying these things as if they're blatantly obvious, though, so I keep my actual reaction hidden. "Oh yeah!" I say.

"So, I'll offer to help them gather grass, then I'll try asking them for some stalks. The seasons where we get a lot of grass are over now, so there might not be that much, okay?"

"That's okay! Thanks, Tory!"

Really, Tory, you're an amazing older sister.

The next day, I accompany Tory downstairs as she leaves to go to the

forest, and ask Ralph and Lutz if they'll help me. They agree to do it, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. However, there's no way I'm going to rely solely on them.

I'm going to go and gather some grass myself. Fortunately, grass grows around the well in the places the paving stones don't cover. I don't know if the stalks can be used, though.

"Mommy, I want to go down to the well with you."

"Oh! Do you want to help out?" "Nuh-uh. Something else." It might be kind of rude, but if I spend all my time helping out, I won't be able to gather any grass. "I wanna gather grass." I show her the little basket Tory made earlier. "Ah, do your best."

I may have refused to help out, but she's still letting me accompany her down, whether it's because she doesn't want to get in the way of my enthusiasm or because she's happy that I have enough strength to move around like this.

Once again, I go down the stairs, following my mother as she carries the laundry down. This is my second trip today, so just going down the stairs made me so winded that there's no way I can gather any grass.

I rest next to my mother as she draws water from the well, then uses a foul-smelling, not-foamy, animal-based detergent to start scrubbing away at the laundry.

"Ohh! If it isn't little Maine!" calls out a woman, who I don't recognize, in a friendly voice. "Good morning," I say politely. "Ah, Carla!" says my mother, with a smile. "Morning. You're up early today."

From my mother's reaction, it would seem that I'm misremembering. This must be an acquaintance of Maine's. I try to keep my lack of recognition off of my face while I dig through my memories a little.

I really do know this person. According to my memory, this is Ralph and Lutz's mother. She's got a fairly strong build and, hmmm, actually seems like a very reliable person.

So, should I say something like, "thanks for all your help"? Wait, no, no, that

is absolutely not what a five-year-old would say. What does a little kid say to an older woman that she's on really good terms with? Someone, help!

Carla looks over at me as I'm caught up in spinning thoughts around my head, then goes to draw water from the well. She hauls the bucket up effortlessly, then starts washing her own laundry as well. Of course, she's using the foul animal-based soap.

"How are you doing today, Maine?" she asks. "It's rare to see you outside."

"I'm picking some grass! Ralph and Lutz said that they're gathering it for the chickens." "Aww, for us? You shouldn't have," she says, in a tone of voice that seems to imply that it's no big deal either way as she continues to pound away at her laundry.

She, along with my mother, is having a lively conversation about this and that with the other mothers that have gathered around the well. Incidentally, it's amazing how all of these mothers are talking so much while continuing to work so diligently.

Nevertheless, this soap really stinks. If you tried using some herbs to help erase the smell, wouldn't it be nicer? Or maybe would the two smells multiply and turn into an unbearable stench?

Reminded of my plans for improvement, I stand up and start tearing grass from the ground. I try to look for plants with thick, straight stalks that I can use, but I can't actually tear those out with my own strength.

Doing this with my bare hands is impossible. Someone, get me a sickle, please...

Of course, no sickle arrives, and there's no way I can get any of this with just my bare hands. Well, whatever. I'm going to just rely on Tory, Ralph, and Lutz, who went to the forest to help feed the chickens.

I've given up on finding grass that I can use, so I start pulling up the little sprouts or weaker leaves that the chickens might be able to eat. Even I can pull these out with no problem.

"Maine, it's time to go!" calls my mother, holding her tub full of tightly

wrung-out clothes. It seems like she's done with the laundry already. I've barely filled my little basket halfway, but my mother has to go to work today, and there's no way I'm going to get scolded for being selfish. I pick up my basket, and start walking back home.

"Are you all set?" she asks. "Right, let's go."

"Okay!"

When I first became Maine, I had a fever and my mother was taking time off from work to take care of me, so I didn't know anything but how life inside my own home was like. Now that I'm healthy again, it seems that I'm going to be left in the care of my elderly neighbor, who's agreed to babysit me.

If she hadn't, Tory wouldn't be able to go to the forest. Got it.

"Mommy's got to go to work now, Maine. Be a good girl and keep quiet, okay?"

"Okay!" "I'll leave her to you, Gerda." "Right, right," she says. "Come, Maine."

Gerda's place is full of other children, being watched over just like me. All of these kids are basically infants, who could only really escape by toddling away. In this town, when you're about three years old, you're strong enough to start going with your older brothers and sisters to the forest and helping out with the chores. In short, it seems like my family thinks that I'm as weak as a toddler, and can't stay at home by myself.

What the heck?!

As I fume about my family's shocking evaluation of my own worth, I see a boy pick up a toy that had fallen on the ground and move to stick it in his mouth. Next to him, a tiny little girl suddenly started crying and hitting him.

"Whoa, gross!" I exclaim. "Don't put that in your mouth!"

"Oh my," says the old lady. "Don't just start hitting him," I say to the little girl. "What's going on?" "Now, now," says the old lady.

I'm supposed to be just another kid getting baby-sat, but as the biggest kid around I've started watching out for the other kids.

"Oh my,"

"now, now," what the heck! Gerda, old lady, do your job!

While I help Gerda put the littlest kids to sleep, I start thinking about how I'm going to turn the grass stalks I'm going to get into papyrus.

Honestly, I don't really remember how papyrus was made. I never actually had to know.

Certainly, I remember seeing papyrus. It was remarkably thick, with fibers running horizontally and vertically. The fibers on the back were different from the ones on the front and only one side was writable, and there was a note to the side instructing us not to bend it... but there wasn't anything written there about how it was made.

Even more troubling, I can't remember what the photo I saw of it getting made even looked like. I have a hunch about how I might make the fibers all run in the right direction, but how do I bond them together? Is it like rice paper? Do I need some kind of glue or binding agent?

As I think back on how those historical documents neglected to mention these important details, my head tilts to one side. For now, I think I'll try taking a part of the fibers from the hardest stems, then weaving them horizontally and vertically as tightly as I can. With this, I think I won't need any sort of binding agent. That parchment seemed kind of cloth-like, and this is still my first time making pseudo-papyrus, so if I'll be satisfied if I can just get a page i can write on.

"Maine, someone's here for you," says Gerda. "Toooryyyy~!"

It's evening time, so Tory and the others have come back from the forest to pick me up. I'm so relieved. I was so glad to hear that someone came for me. That emotion sweeps over me, and I cling tightly to Tory.

Old lady Gerda's babysitting did not involve looking after anyone. If something wasn't very dangerous, she'd just leave it be. If someone peed somewhere, she'd wipe it up with a wet cloth and do nothing else. The

room reeked of filth. Since I've got the common knowledge of Japan stuck in my head, it's obvious that this day-care is truly terrible. Leaving your kids with a babysitter like that is truly terrible.

Really, I want to do something about it, but the problem's too big for my tiny hands. I can't do any of the things I'm thinking of with my own hands, and I also don't know if Gerda's methods are common or not around here. If I start complaining, they might think that I'm the crazy one. I really wanted to run away from that deplorable environment as fast as I could. I waited in agony, wishing that someone would hurry up and come get me.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Tory, patting me on the head. "Did you get lonely after staying there for so long?"

"When you get a little bit stronger, you can totally start coming with us to the forest," says Ralph. "It would be great if you could come with us in the spring!" says Lutz.

I suddenly realize that I absolutely must get stronger. Every single one of my problems has been because I'm too weak.

"Oh, right!" says Ralph. "Here's the grass stalks we promised you." He reaches into his basket and grabs a fistful of grass to show me. In an instant, my worries about the old lady Gerda are blasted out of my head. The important thing here is not old ladies, it's books. It's paper.

"Oh, so much! I'm so happy! Hey, while I was down at the well, I helped get you some grass too!"

I stand tall and proud as I deliver this information, but for some reason the three of them just pat my head. To make things worse, Lutz looks down at me with a warm smile, like he's praising me for having tried my hardest.

Hey, how much does everyone think that I'm a child that can't do anything useful? ...I mean, I guess I can't actually do real work, though.

I exchange the grass I'd collected in the little basket that Tory made for the grass that the three of them had collected for me.

Now then, with this, it's time to make some pseudo-papyrus.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. 200 yen is roughly two US dollars.
2. For American audiences: A4 paper is analogous to 8.5" x 11".

Chapter 10: Preparing for Winter

I had originally planned to start working on turning the grass stalks that the other kids had gathered for me into my pseudo-papyrus, but it seems like fate had other plans for me.

I was trying to go down to the well so that I could start working on extracting the plant fibers from these stalks.

Soon, we'll all be stuck indoors as the long winter creeps in, so we'll have to make preparations in advance. Why, though, am I being pressed into service? I'm so weak that I'm not good for anything! According to Maine's memories, all she ever did was catch a cold, then spend all that time uselessly wandering around. In other words, I'm completely useless. (I'm hoping I don't actually catch a cold, though.)

"You'll go help your father, Maine. Come," she says. "Doesn't Daddy have work?"

"It's his turn to take a few days off. It wouldn't be good if the soldiers couldn't prepare for winter, you know?"

...Giving employees time off to go prepare for winter is an unexpectedly reasonable thing for an employer to do. On top of that, is preparing for the winter really so hard that it requires a man's help?

Regardless, even if my father is home, it's unusual for me to be paired up with him. He's a muscle-headed soldier, after all, so it's usually the much more fit and energetic Tory that winds up going with him.

Since the entire family's home, I don't think I'll be able to escape. And, since it seems like my father's specifically nominated me, I've got no choice but to follow him.

"...So what are we going to do?" I ask.

Next to the kitchen window, my father is pulling out some things that look like tools.

"We're going to go through the house and do a little maintenance on anything that needs it. The door's what's going to protect us from a big

snowstorm, so we need to make sure the hinges are tight, there's no rust, and there aren't any holes in the wood. When we're done with that, we're going to clean out the chimney and the flue for the stove. We don't want to have any problems with those during the winter."

"Huhhh..."

I understand what needs to be done, but how the hell am I supposed to help with any of that? I can barely hold a screwdriver, much less turn it. I can't carry anything heavy, either! You can see these skinny little arms right?!

However, if I'm enthusiastic about doing whatever little bit I can to help out, it'll go a long way to helping build up my family's confidence in me. I can definitely help identify the loose parts on the hinges, and my modern-age knowledge will make spotting rust a piece of cake.

"Daddy, on this hinge, isn't this nail getting rusty?" I say, pointing at a nail. My father bends down to study it. "...Looks like it'll hold for now."

Uh, wait, no matter how you look at it, a worn-out nail like this is going to rust away, right?

I'm immediately worried by how confidently my father said that. Once winter hits, this door's our main defense against a snowstorm, so it breaking down halfway through would be very bad for us. I climb up on a chair so I can reach the door, and try to rattle it back and forth. No matter how confident my father may be, if I'm able to break it like this, then surely he'd recognize my superior judgement.

After I wiggle the door a few times, the top hinge pops off with a sharp ping, and the door starts to precariously sway on its one remaining hinge. I nod in satisfaction, but my father's face goes ghastly white as he sees the door wobble.

"M-Maine?!"

"Looook, it broke!" I say, pointing at the door. "It wasn't going to last the winter. Make sure you fix it, Daddy!"

My father, pretending to ignore his judgement error, helps me down off

the chair. "Maybe you should go help your mother now."

Perhaps he's upset that his daughter pointed out his mistake? I shrug my shoulders, shaking my head. It can't be helped, I'm not going anywhere. My mother specifically assigned me to help my father, so I'm going to stay next to him and continue my inspections. I'm going to make sure that we make it safely and comfortably through the winter.

"Huh?" I say. "I've got to make sure you've found everything! We're fixing things so they don't break in the winter, so we shouldn't leave things all beat up like that."

"We can't afford to fix everything, and I can't have you around breaking everything you can. Go see your mother."

...Money problems, again!

I thought I'd be able to make my father take things a little more seriously by breaking the hinge. Instead, I'm having to quietly make my way to the bedroom to go help Tory and my mother.

The two of them are hanging shirts and blankets from clotheslines, as if they were trying to dry them, and rearranging the beds to be closer to the kitchen stove, trying to make the place just a little bit warmer.

"What's wrong, Maine?"

"Daddy said that I should come help you instead, Mommy." "Oh? Well, we're almost done with this, so next we're going to work on getting some more light in here. We should have some beeswax this year. We've also got some tallow and some tree nuts, so we'll spend some time squeezing some oil for the lamp and making a few candles."

Just hearing about the work makes me wrinkle my nose. I've been smelling the stench of animal fats coming from various other houses lately, but the thought of filling our own kitchen with that stink makes me feel really uneasy.

Tory heads off to the storage room to start pressing oil out of the nuts. I, however, don't have enough strength to swing a hammer, so I can't seek shelter in the storage room with her.

Next to my mother, our largest saucepan sits over the fire, filled with nothing but beef tallow.

It stinks!! Hang in there, me...

I might be able to bear this stench for now, but it looks like the total extent of my mother's preparation is only just melting the tallow alone and skimming off the impurities that rise to the top.

"Wait, Mommy, is that really all you're doing? You're not going to 'salt it out'?"

"Hmm? What was that?"

Oh, crap. "Salting out" is so extremely obvious, but it looks like she doesn't know about it.

I try not to flinch as my mother's stare drills into me, as if she's asking me if I really have a problem. As best as I can, I try to explain the process using only simple words.

"It's, um... where you add salt water, then you cook it over the fire a little more, and then you strain out the dirt multiple times?"

"Salt water?" she asks. "Yeah. When you leave it alone and it cools down, only the fat on top will harden, and the water on the bottom will stay liquid, you know? Then, you can take out the water, and only use the fat that was on top. It's more work, but it will smell a lot better, and it'll be a higher quality fat, too."

I don't know if it's because I said "higher quality" or not, but my mother starts salting out the tallow. The quality of the candles that we're going to be burning throughout the entire winter is literally a life-or-death matter for me. We're going to be trapped indoors with it, after all. Living in a house filled with that kind of stench for the whole winter would be far too much for me to bear.

I don't actually know the right concentration of salt we should be using, but even just a little should make things better, right?

I guessed on the concentration, but as we salted out the tallow, it

gradually started turning from a dirty yellow to a pure white. We'll be able to use this to make candles, and then when spring comes around and we need to make soap, we can melt the candles again and re-use the tallow.

Not one to waste anything, my mother uses the chunks of meat and bone that we filtered out of the tallow to make a delicious soup stock, which we have for lunch. After that, we start making the candles.

"Now then," says my mother. "Tory, please work on the candles. Your father and I will go and start working on the firewood."

"Okaay!" says Tory, cheerfully.

...Uh, what am I supposed to do, then?

The three of them stand up and get to work. I think about it for a little while, then decide to follow along behind my mother, who's about to step out the front door. I guess I'm going to continue trying to help her out. She notices me, however, and points firmly back towards the kitchen table.

"Maine, go help Tory with the candles. Try not to get in the way."

"...Fine."

Why do you have so little trust in me?

I turn back to the kitchen, where Tory is cutting string into lots of equal lengths to use as wicks. She ties them to wooden sticks, letting them dangle. She takes each stick and starts to dip the strings into and out of the pot of tallow, one by one. As she dips them over and over, tallow starts to soak into and harden around each string, gradually building in circumference with each repetition. Slowly, candles start to take shape.

"Huh, so is that how you make candles..." I muse. "Maine, don't just watch, help me!" says Tory, scowling.

Tory's starting to get mad, so I decide to help out. I chop up some herbs to erase the scent, then take some candles from the pile so that I can start rolling them in the herbs. They'll have some effect when they're stuck to the outside of the candle, but next year, I'm going to make sure that these herbs get mixed in to the tallow as it melts.

“Maine! Don’t play around!” says Tory. “...I’m only going to use these ones. It’s better to have candles that aren’t smelly, right? Please, Tory!”

“Okay, fine, but only those ones!”

I nod vigorously to show that Tory’s made herself clear.

I don’t know if this will work or not, so I wasn’t planning on doing this to every candle anyway. I get the herbs attached to five of the candles, varying the amount and positioning so that I can try to figure out what will produce the best result.

While Tory and I keep working like that on the candles, our parents work on preparing enough firewood. There’s so much careful preparation that goes into preparing for the winter, but it’s necessary if we don’t want to freeze to death. To supplement the kindling that Tory brought back, my father’s brought back a huge number of logs, each half a meter long, that he went out and purchased. He’s currently splitting them into firewood, his hatchet beating out a steady rhythm as he works. My mother collects the wood as it splits apart, then carries it to another room to stack it up for later.

“Mommy, where are you taking that?” I ask, startled, as she opens a door to a room I’d never seen before. This is the first time I’ve noticed it, but attached to the storage room is what seems to be an additional storage room. It looks like it might not be used for anything but storing materials that were prepared for the winter. Already, the room is half-filled with chopped wood.

“Huh?” I ask, following her in. “What’s this room for?”

“It’s... the winter storage room, you know?” she says. “Maine, why are you asking about this now?”

Come to think of it, I had been wondering where the heck all of the firewood that Tory had brought back was being stored, but it looks like it’s being kept in here. We typically keep the firewood we use on a day-to-day basis in the storage room, so I guess I just never noticed the other room.

“...It’s cold.”

“Well, this is the farthest place in the house from the stove, after all.”

Our house doesn't have a dedicated living room with a beautiful fireplace, so the kitchen stove is the only real source of heat in the entire house. We spend most of every day in the kitchen, as a result.

Also, since the bedroom is separated from the kitchen (and the stove) by a wall, we've pushed all of the beds in the room up against the closest wall. While the stove burns, the heat radiates through the wall, so when it's time for the children to go to bed the beds are quite warm. They're only warm right when we go to bed, however. Our mother quenches the fire before she goes to bed, so the room is piercingly cold by the time we wake up.

This winter storage room, however, is the furthest room away from the stove, so it's very cold in here. During the winter, this room looks like it would be great for storing food, preserves, and maybe even oil for a while, kind of like a natural refrigerator.

“Wow, we have a lot of wood,” I say, amazed. “We might just barely have enough, don't you think?”

Even though the room's half-full?!

Looking at the pile of firewood before me, I suddenly start thinking about the problem of deforestation. If a single house burns this much firewood over the course of the winter, how much wood does this entire city go through in a single year?

“Maine, don't space out,” says my mother. “Make sure you're ready for your handiwork.”

I'm not spacing out!! Deforestation is a serious problem that merits significant thought!

Even as I try to object, my mother's already heading back out towards the kitchen. I hurry after her. I really don't want to be in that gloomy, window-less room by myself.

“Mommy, what's handiwork?”

“Hmm... well, the men might do things like repairing the tools they use for their jobs, or maybe use the time to make furniture. We need to make sure we have enough materials ready for that.” “Oh, it’s the jobs we do during the winter?”

As I’m asking my questions, my mother is counting out how many balls of yarn she has. “That’s right. As for women, making clothes is our most important job, you know? If we don’t spin enough thread for weaving cloth or sewing, and if we don’t dye things in advance, we won’t be able to make anything. My job is dyeing thread, so I already have enough of that for now, but I’ll need to spend some time preparing some plants, like nilen, to spin into more thread next year.”

“Ohh...” “On top of that, your sister’s baptism is next summer! We’re going to need brand new clothing for that, since it’s a special day... Hm, and I’m going to need to make that this winter, while I have time...”

My mother’s face goes fierce as she concentrates, calculating whether or not she’ll have enough materials for the task. I don’t want to interrupt her at all, so I quietly migrate downstairs to the well, where Tory is working.

“Tory, what are you doing for your handiwork?”

“I’m making baskets! I’ll sell them in the spring.”

Tory’s already started preparing the materials she’ll need for her work. She’s brought down a bundle of sticks that she’d gathered in the forest, soaked them, and peeled the bark off. Now, it looks like she’s using a knife to shave them down, parallel to the grain.

“Maine, what will you do?” she asks. “Me? I’m going to make some ‘pseudo-papyrus’.”

“What’s that?” “Eheheh, it’s a seeeeecret!”

Following Tory’s example in getting a head start on my winter’s work, I’ll start separating the fibers I’ll need to make my pseudo-papyrus. This is an extremely important part of my preparation! This is a necessary task that nobody could possibly get mad at me about.

To extract the fibers, I can probably do something similar to what Tory’s

doing. I'll strip the skin off of the grass stalks, soak them in water, and then dry them. Since there's not very much time left to finish our preparations, I wasn't able to get a whole lot of grass. Now, though, I can finally start working on separating out these plant fibers.

"Hey, Tory," I say, "can I get some water?"

"...Sure." "Hey, Tory," I say, "how do you think I should take just the fibers out of this?" "Huh? Ummmm..." "Hey, Tory," I say, "these won't fly away if I dry them like this, right?" "....."

I bundle up the plant fibers that I've managed to extract. There aren't a whole lot of them, but for the purposes of my experiments I should be able to make maybe one or two pages with this amount.

And, so, I conclude my final preparations for the coming winter. Whoof, man, I worked hard!

Huh? Why's Tory looking so exasperated?

Chapter 11: Slate - Acquired!

May contain disturbing content, see note 1 for details.

The most important part of preparing for the winter is stockpiling food. Unlike Japan, there aren't any supermarkets around here that stay open all year round. The winter weather closes down the town markets, and there aren't very many vegetables that can really be gathered outside. So, if you don't want to starve to death, procuring enough food in advance is indispensable.

And, so, here I am, sitting in a beat-up second-hand wagon amidst a huge pile of boxes. I was rudely awakened this morning, in pitch-blackness, long before the dawn had even begun to break.

"Now, then," my father cheerfully boomed, "today we're going to the farming village! Is everyone ready?"

There's no excuse for doing that.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, wondering what on Earth he's talking about. I scowled at him, but both my mother and Tory are beaming happily. What do I do? All I can do is follow along with the conversation.

"Come to think of it, Maine," said my mother, clapping her hands together, "you were out sick while we were talking about this earlier, so you might not have heard."

My father and Tory nodded in consent. Once again, I'd been left out of a family discussion. I wasn't the slightest bit amused. I tried to glare sullenly at them, but they'd already started quickly moving around as they got ready to leave.

"Anyhow, make sure you dress very warmly, Maine!" she said as she gathered boxes. "You got really sick last year!"

There's no way they were going to leave me to take care of myself all day, so I had no choice but to quietly follow along as she clattered her way downstairs.

...Nevertheless, why are we going to a farming village, anyway?

I had hoped to walk on my own power in order to work on building up some more strength, but my father, frustrated by how slow I was, picked me up and put me in the cart. Now, I'm riding amidst a variety of barrels, empty bottles, piles of cloth, bundles of cord, bags of salt, and all of the other things it seems like we need in order to go visit a farming village.

...Hmm? Perhaps, since I'm in this cart, I'm the most useless piece of luggage on this trip?

I don't have a whole lot of space up here, so I make myself as small as I can and settle down. Up front, my father is yoked to the cart, pulling it forward while my mother and Tory push it from behind. It's becoming really obvious that I'm just extra weight on this trip, which is a little bit depressing.

"Hey, Mommy," I say, "Why're we going to a village?"

"There's not many places where we can go in the city to smoke our meat, you know?" she says. "So, we're going to the nearest village and borrowing one of their smoke huts." "Smoking meat? Oh yeah, we did go buy a lot of meat the other day."

We already salted it, brined it, and did all sorts of other things to preserve that meat, but there's still more stuff to do? Is this process maybe a little too painful? Is the meat still okay?

As I count off the days since we bought the meat on my fingers, I grow more and more anxious. My mother looks over at me, shocked.

"What are you talking about? Today's pig-slaughtering day, you know. We're going to buy two pigs, then help everyone out to spread out the work, and then we'll all share the results."

"Uh?"

My ears instantly reject my mother's words. In the fraction of a second it takes the sounds to reach my brain, a chill starts running down my spine.

"P... P-p-p... pig-slaughtering day?!"

"It's a day where we go meet up with our neighbors, slaughter and

butcher a few pigs, salt and smoke the meat, and make things like bacon, pot roasts, and sausage. Maine... oh, right, last year you stayed in the cart because you were so feverish.”

If at all possible, I would like to get a fever this year too. If I can do that, then at the very least I might be able to shield my eyes from that grim display.

“Mommy, didn’t we buy a ton of meat at the market the other day...?”

“There’s no way that much meat would last the entire winter, you know? We bought that to supplement the meat we’re going to get from slaughtering pigs today, since you know that won’t be enough by itself either, right?”

I thought we had bought a huge amount of meat, but I hadn’t even considered the possibility that what we bought was just to supplement our stocks. I have no idea whatsoever as to how much meat is truly required when preparing for the winter.

It looks like can’t save myself from being dragged to pig-slaughtering day, so a wave of depression sweeps through my heart. In contrast, Tory is wearing her biggest smile while she pushes the cart onward.

“This is going to be fun!” she says. “We’re going to get to help out, and then we’ll get to eat freshly-made sausage. This is your first time helping, but when you get caught up in the noise and excitement everyone’s making, it feels kinda like a mini festival! I’m excited that you’re helping out this year!”

“ ‘Everyone’?” I ask, tilting my head to the side in confusion. My mother shoots me a look, as if asking me why I’m asking such obvious questions. “The rest of the neighbors, right? Slaughtering a pig is a big task, so it’s not really easy to do it with less than ten adults, you know?”

Whoa, the neighbors, huh...

There’s a lot of spots in Maine’s memories that are really fuzzy, so there’s no doubt that there will be a lot of people there who will know me even though I have no idea who they are. Far more troublesome, however,

is what we've come to do today: slaughtering and butchering a pig. Just remembering the grisly spectacle at the market the other day sends chills down my spine.

"...I don't wanna go," I say. "What are you saying?" asks my mother. "If we don't go, we're not going to have any sausage or bacon for the winter, you know?"

It seems like I'm not allowed to complain, since we don't have enough food for the winter otherwise. If we don't go, we'll starve, so no matter how much I complain, I'll still be forced to cooperate.

As my mood grows gloomier and gloomier, our cart reaches the southern gate of the city walls.

"Good morning," says a soldier, one of my father's subordinates, standing guard at the gate. "Oh? Sir, are you running late? Everyone else already left the gates a long time ago."

"Yeah, I know..."

Somehow, it seems like our neighbors have already long gone.

"Have a good day, sir."

The young-looking guard smiles and waves at me as we go past, and I make myself wave back. Being friendly is important.

This is my first time leaving the city since becoming Maine, so when the cart rumbles out of the short tunnel the gate is set into, I let out an astonished gasp. To be honest, I hadn't even thought that the environments inside and outside the city walls could be so different.

"Whoa..."

First of all, there aren't any houses. The streets within the city are always so crowded and claustrophobic, but this road widens into a broad highway as it leaves the gates. Off in the distance, I can see a village, with about ten to fifteen buildings that just look like dots on the horizon.

Also, the air is fantastic. As we leave, the accumulated stench of human filth dissipates into nothingness, leaving only sweet, clean air in its place.

There are no walls here to trap in foul air.

Everywhere I look is green, from the light green of the rolling fields before me to the deep green of the tall, tall trees of the forest in the distance. Everything is extraordinarily tranquil.

“Maine, close your mouth before you bite off your tongue,” warns my father. “Eh?!”

Immediately after my father gives his warning, the cart lurches hard to the side, then starts to bounce and jostle even worse than it was doing so before. We’ve left the cobblestone roads of the city behind us, and the road ahead is packed, unpaved dirt. The luggage shakes around as if it might pop out of the cart, but, luckily, the ropes tied around it keep it in place. I, however, have no such security.

On a sunny day, you’d have to clatter over hard, uneven packed clay. On a rainy day, you’d have to slog through mushy, soggy mud. These roads are the worst! Pour some asphalt!

Unable to escape through my tightly-closed mouth, my objections bounce around in my head wildly. I cling, desperately, to the side of the cart, trying my hardest not to fall out.

“We’re almost there,” says my father.

Fifteen minutes after we left the city gates, we’ve arrived at the entrance to the farming village. The village is bustling, with countless people moving about.

Butchering pigs is primarily a man’s work. Holding down a hundred-kilogram pig, trussing it up, and hoisting it all requires a good deal of strength. Meanwhile, the women handle setting up the smoking huts, getting huge amounts of water ready for boiling, making sure all of the tools and salt are ready, and doing other general prep work.

It looks like the slaughter had actually started just before we finally arrived. Of course, if you’re not there to help, you don’t get any meat.

“Oh no,” exclaims my father, “they’ve already started!”

“That’s not good!” says my mother. “Tory, hurry!” “Yeah!”

The three of them let go of the cart, then pull out aprons made from some sort of thick, heavy material that looks like it’s been heavily covered with wax. My mother and Tory run towards the smoking huts, where quite a few women have already gathered, putting on their aprons as they ran. My father ties his apron on securely, grabs the spear he uses for work out of the back of the wagon, then dashes towards the town square.

That was fast!!

In the blink of an eye, my family abandoned me before I had any time to react. I might still be able to run after my mother, but I have no idea what I’d be supposed to do in such a huge crowd, so it’s only natural that I’m apprehensive about that idea. Since this is a yearly event, it looks like everyone already knows what they need to do from common knowledge. Give me the instruction manual, please...

Since I’d just get in the way if I tried to help, I’ll stay here and watch over the cart until someone calls for me. I sit down amongst the rest of the abandoned luggage, staring off into space, convincing myself that what I’m doing is an important task.

However, the spot where my father chose to leave his luggage is in full view of the village square, where they’re doing the slaughtering. There’s a little bit of distance between me and the square, but I can clearly hear the agonized squeals of one of the pigs and plainly see as it frantically tries to escape.

A rope has been tied to a wooden stake set firmly in the ground. The other end of the rope has already been tied around the pig’s right hindleg. The men chase it around and around the stake, desperately trying to catch and hold it down. I see a flash of familiar pink hair amongst the crowd; Ralph and Lutz are undoubtedly in there.

“Here I come!” yells my father, charging onto the battlefield with spear at the ready. He sets his spear, then with a mighty shout, pierces into the pig with a single, strong thrust. The pig collapses to the ground from that one strike, convulsing in its death throes before finally falling still.

I squeak in horror as all the blood drains from my face, but the people in the plaza start cheering for my father. My mother runs out, carrying a metal container, kind of like a bucket, on a somewhat lengthy wooden pole. Another woman follows, bringing with her some kind of large bowl.

I have no idea what they're about to do, so I lean forward to get a better look. In the next instant, blood suddenly flies out, and some people's aprons are stained bright, dripping red. Preparations for catching the blood had just been finished, it seems, so my father had yanked out the spear and caused blood to start spurting from the wound. Reflexively, I clamp my hand over my mouth and fall back into the wagon.

The pig is concealed from view behind the skirt of the woman with the bowl, but I can see how she collects the massive amounts of blood in her bowl, transferring it to the bucket whenever it gets full. This seems to be her everyday job, from the way she moves. My mother, on the other hand, has her brow deeply furrowed as she puts all of her strength behind churning the blood as it's poured into the bucket.

...My mother's pretty scary.

Then, the pig was brought over to a specially prepared tree and strung up, upside down, from a sturdy branch. All of the blood that hadn't been completely drained from the body starts to drip down.

Now, it's time for the real butchering to begin. A man steps forward, wielding a thick, heavy butcher's knife, and vertically slits the pig's belly open.

That's about all I can remember. When I wake up, I'm no longer in the village, but instead in some room made of stone. Judging by what I can see of the ceiling from where I'm laying, this isn't my house. I blink my eyes to clear them, then I suddenly recall what I was watching just before I fainted. I feel terrible, suddenly.

It's strange, though. I can't shake the feeling that I'd seen something like this before.

What would it have been? Something where something got hung up, then carved apart...

It feels like it's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite make the connection. I don't think this is one of Maine's memories, I think this is one of mine. I think I saw something similar to this in Japan...

Oh, got it! I was at a fish market near the harbor in Ibaraki, and I watched them hang up an enormous goosfish and slice it apart! I remember it clearly now.

Now that I think about it, there are some similarities between slaughtering a pig and the live fish cleaning show. There are some things that really can only be eaten when they're really fresh, and I can understand how everyone seemed to find it such a fun sight to see.²

Well, I can understand it in theory, but I don't personally find it all that fun. For one thing, a tuna fish don't scream sorrowfully when you kill them, and the blood doesn't drip thickly out of it. Urgh, I really don't feel well...

I cover my mouth and roll over on my side, which causes me to fall off of whatever I was sleeping on with a thud.

"Oww..."

I push myself up with my arms to get a better view of my surroundings. It seems like I had been laid down on a smallish wooden bench. There's a fireplace nearby, with a fire crackling inside, so I don't feel cold at all. I don't, however, see anyone nearby, nor do I hear any voices.

...So, where am I?

As I try to figure out where exactly as I am, a soldier peers into the room, drawn by the thud I made when I fell down.

"Oh! You're awake," he says. "Mister Otto?"

I sigh in relief, seeing a familiar face. If Otto is here in this stone building, then this must be either one of the waiting rooms or the night duty room at the city gates. Now that I know where I am, my anxiety gradually starts to dissipate.

"Ah, you remember me, then?" he says, relief showing plainly on his

face. Since I look like a little girl, I'm sure he was worried that I'd start crying if I woke up and saw someone I didn't know, and then he wouldn't know what to do.

"I didn't forget!" This man, after all, is one of the precious few cultured people in this world, and the man who is going to (hopefully) teach me how to read and write.

I give my best imitation salute, tapping my chest with my fist. Otto smiles wryly, ruffles my hair in response, and starts to explain my present situation.

"The corporal brought you here a little while ago, looking really embarrassed. Apparently, you collapsed in your wagon. He said he'll come by to pick you up as soon as he's done with what he needs to do in the village."

I don't know how long it takes to butcher a pig, but even after it's butchered there's a lot of processing work that needs to be done, so I don't think it's the kind of thing that's going to be over quickly.

...Now that I think about, Tory said that there was going to be dinner made with really fresh meat, didn't she?

It seems like I might be waiting here for quite some time. I'd brought the materials for my fake papyrus with me in the cart, since I didn't know if I was going to be waiting around for a while in the village. Unfortunately, I don't have any of it with me now.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Otto, "Are you lonely because your mom and dad aren't here?"

"...No," I say, shaking my head. "I'm just wondering what I should do while I wait?"

I accidentally let slip my true motives. Otto stares at me for a little bit, then mutters something about remembering that I look a couple years younger than I really am.

"I've got just the thing, Maine," he says, retrieving something from nearby. "How about we kill some time with this?"

“Whoa! A slate!”

Otto hands me the slate. He must have known that I’d definitely come through the gates today, so he would have brought it with him to give to me. He’s cultured, he’s considerate, he’s kind, he’s too amazing!!

“I have to stand guard at the gate today,” he says, writing Maine’s name at the top of the slate, “so how about you practice with this?”

He hands me a slate pencil and a cloth, then leaves the room. I see him off with a huge wave and a brilliant smile, clutching the slate tightly to my chest. As he closes the door behind him, I look down at the slate.

It’s probably best to describe it as a kind of mini-blackboard, about the size of an A4 sheet of paper. It’s a thin plate of dark stone, surrounded by a simple wooden frame. Both the back and the front can be written on, and on one side, thin lines have been painted to help you practice writing straight.

The slate pencil is a tool for writing on the slate. It’s cool to the touch, hard, and seems to be made out of some kind of stone, but it looks to me like a long, slender piece of chalk. This slightly dirty cloth seems to be what I’ll use instead of an eraser.

The letters Otto wrote at the top of the slate have gotten a little smudged, after I held the slate against my shirt a little while ago.

“Whoa, my heart’s racing!”

I set the slate on top of the desk, and pick up the chalk. As soon as I grip it like I would a pencil, my heart starts pounding in my ears.

First, I try copying the completely unfamiliar letters that Otto wrote at the top for me. The mental strain of writing these new characters for the first time is almost too much, and my writing is wobbly and distorted. If this were Japan, the teacher would tut at me and have me start over. However, stopping now to erase the board would be a waste of time, and I’m far too happy right now to finally see letters again.

I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, then use the cloth to gently wipe off the left side of the board. I carefully write out another line, and

this time it's much better than before.

I write my name, and erase it, and write it, and erase it... When I get tired of that, I switch to writing all of the haiku and tanka poetry I can remember in Japanese, and erase it, and write it, and erase it...

Ahhh, this is bliss. Reading and writing is such a joyous thing.

There may have been a fire going, but a cold draft still crept its way in. As I waited for however many hours it took for my family to come pick me up, playing with the slate for the entire time, my weak constitution caused me to catch a cold embarrassingly quickly, and my fever came back.

"Your temperature still hasn't gone down, so stay in bed," admonishes Tory. "Don't get up again!"

"...Fine."

My parents are rushing in and out of the house, carrying in loads of vegetables and cramming them into the winter preparation room. In the kitchen, Tory has been boiling down the fruits that she collected from the forest and making jam. For the first time since coming to this world, I'm smelling sweet things, and the way it permeates the house makes me a little bit happier.

In the midst of stocking up on alcohol and bringing in pig meat, Tory had come in to bring me some soup for lunch. I had put my slate to the side, and taken the tray from her.

"I'm sorry, Tory," I say. "I mean it!"

"Oh? Do you promise not to tell on me?" "I don't make promises like that!"

That is, she doesn't make promises. What even is a promise, anyway?

While the family clatters about, finalizing the preparations for the coming winter, I'm stuck lazing about in my bed, scribbling on the slate that Otto gave me. I practice writing my name, writing whatever sentences in Japanese that come to mind, and so on.

I really do want a book that I can record things in permanently. If I'm

this happy from just being able to write, I'll be even happier if I'm able to read book!

I have to get better soon, so that I can work on making my paper.

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Content advisory: somewhat graphic slaughtering of livestock.
2. Yes, seriously, people will show up at fish markets to watch fish be cleaned. It's a tourist attraction.

Chapter 12: Defeated by Ancient Egypt

About when I wasn't sure whether we were done or not with our preparations, winter flitted into the streets, and real, honest snow began to fall. During the winter, the entire neighborhood is locked in by the snow, so we're typically confined in our houses except on unusually clear days.

For me, if I have books to read, I can let myself be shut away forever, so whiling away the long winter months would be no trouble at all. I, however, don't have a single book. Will I be able to manage this long kind of isolation without them?

As the snow kept falling, it frequently turned into a full-blown snowstorm, forcing us to keep the doors and shutters tightly closed, with thick clothes stuffed into the crevices to try to shield us from the drafts just a little more.

"...Uuuugh, it's dark," I whine. "We're in a snowstorm," says Tory, "there's nothing we can do about that."

The only sources of light in this locked-down apartment are a handful of candles and our stove. It may be daytime, but with our windows sealed so tightly not a single ray of sunlight can get in. This is my first time being in such a gloomy room without a single electric light to brighten it. Even when a hurricane knocked out my power, I had flashlights and the light on my cell phone for illumination, and they got my power restored very quickly. Trapped inside a gloomy room such as this, will I have no choice but to become gloomy myself?

"Hey, Mommy, is everyone's house dark like this?" I ask. "Hmm," she says, "If someone has a little money, they can have quite a few lamps lighting up their homes. We only have one, though."

"Oh? Let's light ours, then!"

My mother sighs and shakes her head at me as I try to insist that lighting equipment is meant to be used. "We want to be careful with our oil, so we should avoid using it whenever we can. If it stays this cold and if the winter drags on, we'll run out of candles eventually, and that would be

a big problem, you know?”

There's no counterargument to the way she talks about frugality. Come to think of it, my own mother in Japan was always talking about scrimping and saving and coming up with elaborate ways to spend as little as possible. To save electricity, she'd unplug the TV when it wasn't in use, although she'd then fall asleep with it on all the time. She'd brush her teeth the barest minimum of water to save on the water bill, yet she'd leave the faucet running constantly while washing the dishes... I wonder what she would do to lighten up this room, if she were in this situation.

“Maine, what are you doing?” asks my mother. “I wonder if this will make the room just a little bit brighter...”

I've grabbed one of my father's old metal gauntlets from his old wartime days, polished them up a bit, and placed it next to a candle, trying to use its metal surface like a mirror to maybe make it seem a little brighter.

“Maine, stop that,” says my father. “I can't see what I'm doing,” says Tory.

Two people rejected me at the same time! Unfortunately, these gauntlets aren't straight pieces of metal, and you can't really say that they're anywhere close to being shiny. They caught the flickering candlelight with a strange, irregular reflection, glimmering harshly in our eyes and making it even more difficult to see what we were doing.

“Ahh, it didn't work... I wonder if there's anything else I can use as a”mirror”...”

“Please don't do unnecessary things,” says my mother.

After being quite clearly asked to stop, I give up on my plans to brighten the room using reflections. It's not like I'm trying to read right now, but I still sigh, lamenting the poor visibility, and go huddle by the warmth of the stove.

Soon after, my mother starts assembling a loom for weaving fabric. This isn't like one of the enormous, mechanical weaver's looms I saw back in Japan. This is much more primitive. I had been wondering how she was

planning on weaving cloth in this tiny room, but it looks like we do have something that's just the right size.

"Tory, your baptism is coming up, so make sure you pay attention to this," says my mother as she carefully instructs Tory on how to work the loom. Tory, with a serious expression on her face, picks up a spool of thread.

"First, put the spool of thread here, then we prepare the warp. Run the thread straight through, like this..."

Making clothing starts by first weaving cloth out of the thread that our mother dyed during the autumn. You weave the cloth, then you sew the clothing, then you embroider it. Next year, we're going to spin the thread too out of wool that we'll buy during the spring. The only thing that we actually purchased in this entire process was the raw materials. It doesn't look like you can just buy new clothing at a store, and fabric doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that commoners can afford.

"That's right, just like that. You're a fast learner, Tory! Maine, do you want to try? If you don't learn how to sew, you'll never be called beautiful, you know?"

"Huh? Beautiful?" "That's right! When it comes to making clothing for your family, it's important that they either look good to others or are very practical, you know? If you want to be beautiful, you need to know how to cook and sew."

Ahhh, then I shall never be beautiful. ...Wait, those conditions sound about right for being a good wife, but they've got nothing to do with being beautiful, right?

In my mind, clothing is something you buy in a store. When you go to the mall, each shop is overflowing with clothing of all sorts of styles and all sorts of designs. I never really showed much interest in clothing and picked outfits that would be good in more-or-less any situation, but even still my closet was full of choices. I didn't really have more than two or three items that were either mended or hand-me-downs.

Sewing is something that I learned in Home Economics in school, but

even then I used an electric sewing machine to do it. The only time I used a needle and thread was when I needed to sew on a button. To be perfectly frank, if it's a woman's job during the winter to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew clothing for her entire family, that's going to be terrible. I have literally zero interest in doing any of that.

Oh, although, if I could maybe use cloth as a substitute for parchment, I'd weave as much as I needed.

"Maine, don't you want to try?" asks Tory, from beside the loom. "No, maybe next time."

She may have been at the loom, but I don't think she wants to become a weaver. Tory seems to be more interested in becoming a seamstress's apprentice, so she wants our mother to teach her how to do needlework. I, however, am very small, so my hands aren't big enough, and, above all, I want nothing to do with any of that, so trying to teach me is entirely pointless.

"Okay, Mom, I'm going to go work on weaving baskets. Make me some good clothes!"

"Of course, leave it to me. They'll be the most stunning clothes you've ever seen."

My mother, confident in her abilities as a seamstress, works with enthusiasm. Every season, all of the children who recently turned seven years old gather at the church for their baptism ceremonies, wearing their nicest clothes. It's the perfect opportunity for a mother to display their skill in preparing the perfect outfit for their child. Perhaps she's thinking of this as some sort of public presentation?

Smiling to herself, she selects a new thread to use as the warp, one that's much thinner than the one Tory had been practicing with.

"This really is a fine thread," she says, smiling wryly as she thinks about how much time it will take to weave it into cloth. "Tory's baptism is in the summer, so she'll be too hot if I use too thick of a fabric, right?"

"It's still winter, though," I say, "Won't Tory have gotten bigger by

summertime?”

In the summer, food is more plentiful and children tend to be healthier and move around a lot more, which I think helps them grow up faster. At least, that’s what all of my measurements showed when I was growing up. If these clothes are made to fit now, then they’ll be too small by summertime.

“That’s true, but I’ll be able to make adjustments so they’ll still fit just fine. What I’m more worried about is how small you are compared to your sister! I don’t know if Tory’s hand-me-downs will fit you for next year. I wonder what we’re going to have to do then?”

That is definitely something to worry about. Good luck, Mother.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, my mother had selected a slender thread that seemed a little more sturdy than one made of wool and started weaving, and Tory has already started working on weaving the baskets she hopes to sell in the springtime. My eyes are starting to adjust, just a little bit, to how gloomy this room is, so it’s time for me to take the first step towards my ambitions and start working on making my pseudo-papyrus.

By weaving these grass fibers together, I’m definitely going to be able to make something kind of like a paper. I will never be outdone by the people of ancient Egypt! This is my battle to win!!

I lay out my fibers on top of the table. Back in Japan, I once wove a square coaster in a basket-weaving class. If I use that method, then making a postcard-size sheet will be the first step of my victory. I take my fibers, which are even thinner than the thread my mother’s using in her weaving, and start weaving them together into rows and columns, tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

I may lack money, technology, and experience, but I shall fight on with my determination, my determination, and my determination!

Whoa, these are too tiny, I’m really straining my eyes. Ah! I messed up!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly

tightly...

These fibers are so slender that it's not easy for me to undo any mistakes I make. I have to rip apart huge chunks of it. As I wrestle with these tiny fibers with gritted teeth, Tory puts her basket weaving aside and comes over to take a peek at what I'm doing.

"Hey, Maine," she says, "whatcha doing?"

"Hm? I'm making 'pseudo-papyrus'."

Tory takes another look at my handiwork, then tilts her head to the side with a puzzled look. It's clear by the expression on her face that she didn't understand anything I just said, nor can she figure out what it is I'm trying to do.

Yeah, it would be hard to figure out just from watching, huh? I haven't even managed to get one square centimeter together, so even I wouldn't be able to tell that this was going to turn into a pseudo-papyrus.

My mother glances over while she weaves her cloth, frowning at the tiny little motions I'm making with my fingers as I'm making my pseudo-papyrus.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

"Maine," she scolds, "if you have time to play around, go help Tory with her basket-weaving."

"Okay. When I've got some free time, I'll go help her, so please don't raise your voice."

I'm absolutely not playing around here, so I absolutely don't have any free time. In fact, this is the busiest I've ever been ever since I was reborn as Maine.

Ah! Another mistake! This is my mother's fault for raising her voice at me. Aaarrrrgh!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

“Maine, really, what are you doing?” asks Tory. “I just said, I’m making ‘pseudo-papyrus’!”

I don’t have enough patience left to answer her nicely, so my response comes out a little bit curt as I put all of my attention into weaving things tightly tightly tightly tightly... It’s not like I hate doing such fine work, and I’m doing something I actually want to do. I’ve got no choice but to persevere and keep powering through this.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

“Hey, Maine,” says Tory. “That’s not going to be very big when you’re done, you know?”

“I know!!” I snap.

I wasn’t really intending to lash out like that, but Tory’s observation hit a real sore spot and caused the words to fly out of my mouth before I could think about them. It’s already been almost a day, but it’s only about as big as my fingertip. I’m very aware of this fact.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

The next day, I sit myself back down in front of my fibers, reminding myself of my determination, my determination. I’m absolutely not going to let Tory get under my skin today.

“Hey,” she says, “what happened to that?”

“.....”

I’m not going to let her bug me. I’m not going to let her bug me. What?! It got all loose! Grr! I must still press on, even like this, even if my heart is breaking as I’m forced to make my repairs!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly... Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly...

“Hey, Maine—”

“Argh!” I yell, clenching my disintegrating pseudo-papyrus in my fist.

“This is impossible! I can’t do it! I’ve lost to this ‘pseudo-papyrus’!”

I’m discouraged to the point where I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to make this into even a postcard-sized sheet. I need to use extremely fine fibers if I want to make something that’s dense enough to use as paper, but it is going to take such a ridiculously long time to make even a postcard-sized sheet. I don’t think that there’s any way I’ll ever be able to prepare enough papyrus to make a single book.

Trying to make this postcard-sized papyrus also let me get a feel how the poorly final product would have turned out. The center of the sheet would have been tightly woven, but it would get looser and looser the closer you got to the edges, until it was full of tiny holes. There was no way I’d be able to actually write anything on the entire page.

“UuuuUUUUUUuuuuugh... I failed... my papyrus plan failed...”

Whether it’s the gathering of raw materials, the difficulty of making it, or the raw time I’d need to spend per-sheet, there’s no way I’d be able to mass-produce any of this. Even if I were to figure out how to make a perfect sheet, I couldn’t make a book out of it.

“Be quiet, Maine!” says my mother. “Stop playing with that grass and go make some baskets!”

“You can’t make books out of baskets...” “I don’t have any idea what you’ve been talking about, but you failed, didn’t you? That’s enough of that, work on the baskets!”

My mother’s getting a little angry, so I’ll go work on the baskets. After all that time weaving the tiny fibers together for my pseudo-papyrus, basket-weaving will be much simpler.

“Tory, Mommy... told me to come help you. Gimme some materials.”

“Sure,” she says, smiling. “Let me show you how to do it.”

With a rustle, she gathers up some materials to hand to me. As I take them, I shake my head distinctly.

“No thanks, I already know how.”

“Huh?”

Tory blinks, curiously, at me. I put her out of my sight and get to work. The grain of the wood is long and straight, like bamboo. I carefully join everything together, tightly enough that no gaps will be able to form. My plan is to make something like a simple tote bag. I pour all of my efforts into my craft, still fuming about the failure of my pseudo-papyrus. Once I finish tightly weaving the bottom panel, I take a moment to calculate how I’m going to pattern the sides of the bag before I start weaving. I design handles into it as well so that it will be easy to carry without hurting yourself.

Where it would have taken me more than five days to finish a postcard-sized sheet of papyrus, it took me just one to make a tote bag. For something made by an unskilled child, it actually looks pretty decent.

“Amazing, Maine!” says my mother. “I didn’t know you were so talented at this. Perhaps you should be a craftswoman’s apprentice in the future, hm?”

“Eh? That’s, um...”

My mother’s eyes are twinkling with pleasure to see her basically good-for-nothing child display this sort of talent (?). I don’t, however, have any plans to become a craftswoman. I have already decided that I am either going to be a librarian or work at a bookstore. Libraries and bookstores don’t really exist in a world without books, though, so those jobs don’t really exist either, but that’s just one small problem.

“Ooooh,” whines Tory, “Maine, how are you so good at this?”

Tory compares the basket she made with the one that I did, a dejected look on her face as she sees the difference in quality.

“Tory,” I say, “don’t worry. If you weave it really tightly and use a pattern like this one, it’ll turn out okay!”

Because, really, the difference here is actually a difference of experience. I used to take the advertising inserts out of newspapers, roll them up, and use them as raw materials to make little junk-art boxes in my spare time. I

never would have thought that it would ever come in handy, though.

“Ooooooooooh... why’s Maine better than meeee...”

Uh oh. I’ve made a mess of her pride as an older sister. Even though it’s much easier for me if Tory treats me like her protege than her rival, I still messed it up.

“Um, uhhhh... oh!! Old lady Gerda taught me how to do it when I was left at her place. I’m always doing it over there when you’re in the forest, so I guess I’m getting pretty good. But when I’m making baskets, you’re doing other things, so you’re good at a lot of things that I’m not, right?”

I have never had to cheer up a crying child before, so I’m in a little bit of a panic right now. I’m trying very hard to explain things to her, hoping to cheer her up myself, but, honestly, I don’t really even know what I’m talking about.

“...I guess you’re right.”

I don’t know how much of that story she’s bought, but she cheered up a little bit when I reminded her that there’s things she’s better at than I am.

“Right!” she says, “I’m going to make a lot of them this winter, and I’m going to get better than you!”

“Okay! Do your best, Tory!”

I breathe a sigh of relief now that Tory’s mood has swung back around. Living like this is hard enough already, and doing so without Tory’s help would be even worse. If she always just told me to do it myself, I’d be in serious trouble. I am very glad that I got her to cheer back up.

“Ah, Tory! If you just pull a little bit harder here, you can straighten things out and make it look a lot neater.”

I may be good at basket weaving, but I’m still so empty inside. All I really want is a book.

I’m sitting next to Tory as she weaves her basket and explaining some of the tricks. I keep staring at my failed pseudo-papyrus, though. Papyrus isn’t going to work, so what is my next step going to be? Through the

winter, as I help Tory make baskets, I contemplate my future options.

Egypt has failed me. The difficulty level is far too high for a child like me.

If Egypt is no good, then what's my next idea? Mesopotamia!

Inventors of cuneiform! Bakers of clay tablets! Three cheers for Mesopotamian civilization!

Sure, they were ravaged by war and by fire, but their clay tablets survived. I'll make clay tablets, carve my writing into them, and bake them in the stove. This can work! Plus, since I'll be kneading clay to form it into these tablets, I can easily pass it off to the adults as just a child playing with clay.

I've decided! Come springtime, when the snow melts, I'll make clay tablets!!

Chapter 13: Interlude - My Savior

My name is Lutz. I'm five years old. I'm the youngest out of the four kids in my family. My older brothers are Zasha, Zeke, and Ralph.

I woke up this morning to a few faint rays of sunlight flickering through the cracks in our shutters. After days of a raging snowstorm, the sunlight is amazing in a big way.

It cleared up!!

Not caring at all about how cold the bedroom would get, I spontaneously throw open the shutters so I can look outside. The sky is a stunning blue, completely empty of clouds, and the reflection of the sunlight across the snowdrifts make the entire city sparkle.

“Whoaaaaa...”

Clear days like this are extremely rare, so when they happen both the adults and children immediately head out to the forest. Missing the rush is really bad. I close the window and hurry to the kitchen.

“Lutz, hurry up!” says Ralph. “Okay!”

Ralph has already finished eating, and is now clattering around trying to get ready. I warm up some hard rye bread¹ and eat it while dipping it in milk. As soon as I finish, I run to get dressed. Today is a perfect day for foraging. In order to harvest par^u, which can only be found during the winter, everyone in the city rushes out to the forest on clear days like this. If you want to get enough for yourself, you absolutely can't be last to arrive. Throughout the year, there aren't very many opportunities to taste something so sweet, so everyone's absolutely hoping they can get any, whether it's a lot or even just one.

Today, I'm not just going with Ralph. Our older brothers Zasha and Zeke, who usually are working at their apprenticeships, are coming with us today. With four of us foraging, we're definitely going to find a lot. The four of us strap boxes and bags to our backs and take off running. We dash down the stairs and out of the house. Our mother's already outside at

the water well, and she waves at us as we run past.

“You’re heading to the forest now? Be careful, don’t overdo it!”

“Got it!” “Hurry!!”

My mother is, as usual, gossiping with the neighbors by the well. It’s really admirable how she’s still able to hold these long conversations, even in the middle of this frigid winter. One of the women chatting around the well is Maine and Tory’s mother. Both of our mothers are really good friends, so us kids were also always really close to each other.

“Tory and her father have already gone, you know?” she says. “Maybe if you hurry you can catch up?”

She didn’t mention Maine’s name. Probably, Maine is helping to watch the house. On days like this, she usually stays in bed instead of coming outside. Now that I think about it, she collapsed in the cart on pig-slaughtering day, just like last year. Last year, they brought her along even though she had a fever, but this year she’d seemed pretty healthy. She missed out on fresh sausage two years in a row now... I feel bad for her.

Maine’s so tiny, frail, cute, and unreliable that I think of her like a little sister even though we’re the same age. That reminds me, she had a weird request for some grass stalks while we were preparing for the winter. I wonder what that was about?

“Zeke! Check that tree!” says Zasha. “On it!”

By the time we arrive at the forest, the paru hunt has already begun. Deep in the snow-bound forest lies a sweet flavor that can’t be harvested except on extremely clear days. The eyes of every single person here are filled with a strange zeal.

Zeke runs towards the tree Zasha points him towards and starts to clamber up it. The rest of us start working to build a fire a little ways away from the tree. We shovel the snow away from a patch of ground, then ignite the firewood we brought with us. I glance over and see that Zeke has decided on the fruit he wants to harvest.

“Lutz, get ready to start climbing,” says Zeke. “Okay!”

I climb up the paru tree to the fruit that Zeke's picked out. Paru trees are magical. It's so white that it looks like it's made out of ice and snow. It has many branches, so it's easy to climb, but the fruits it produces are very close to the top. If this were a normal tree, I'd use a knife to cut the fruit free, but you can't use knives to harvest paru fruit. This is the most dangerous part.

"Lutz, you ready?" asks Zeke. "One moment," I reply.

I shift over until I'm right behind him, then quickly pull off my gloves. I grab tightly onto the long, slender branch that holds the fruit that Zeke's been working on.

"Ahhh, that's freezing," says Zeke. "It's up to you now. I think it's almost done, though."

"Yeah, okay!" I say.

Zeke lets go and climbs down the tree. The stem that I'm gripping onto is freezing cold, just like ice, and the air itself is frigid. In an instant, all the heat in my hands starts to drain away.

Fall quickly!

In order to pick a paru fruit, you have to heat up the branch that it's connected to until it goes soft and limp. However, you absolutely can't use fire under the tree, because the tree's magic immediately puts it out. So, you have to use the heat from your hands in order to warm it up. Bit by bit, the branch I'm holding onto starts to grow limp. The fruit, however, still hasn't fallen.

Still not done yet? How long is "almost done", Zeke?

I start to lose feeling in my hands, a painful numbness prickling through them. Right when the thought that I should switch out crosses my mind, the branch I'm sitting on suddenly bends a little bit.

"Hey, Lutz, let's switch," says Zasha, from behind me. "It just needs a little bit more," I tell him. "Hey, Ralph! It's about to fall!"

As soon as Zasha grabs hold of the branch, the fruit pops off with a wet

noise and starts to fall. Zasha's hands are far warmer than mine are after having held onto the branch for so long. The fruit, about the size of my face, falls straight down to the ground below.

"Go warm up quickly. Your hands are briiight red!"

"Yeah," I reply.

Zasha starts looking for the next fruit and moves to a different branch. I immediately put my gloves back on, then climb back down the tree, being extra careful not to fall. I run over to the fire immediately, throw off my gloves, and hold my hands above the brilliantly burning fire to warm them up. As I rub my hands together over and over by the fire, feeling slowly prickles back into my hands.

"I'm gonna throw it! ...Rrragh!!"

Ralph has found the fallen fruit and is brandishing it triumphantly. With a huge swing, he throws it towards Zeke, then starts climbing up the tree to go relieve Zasha. Zeke picks up the fruit and puts it in a basket. Paru fruit are like huge clumps of ice when they're out in the cold, so you can be as rough with them as you want.

"Whoa, cold..., Zeke, switch with me."

"Roger!"

Zasha has been warming his hands by the fire, but now it's Zeke's turn to throw off his gloves and rub his hands together in the fire's warmth while Zasha goes back to the tree. Harvesting paru is a job that requires a lot of teamwork: the more people you have with warm hands, the better luck you'll have.

Alternating back and forth like this, we gather five fruits.

"It's getting pretty limp," says Zeke as I switch out with him. "Got it."

Our sixth fruit was just about to fall when the afternoon sun started to shine into the forest from high above. The leaves of the paru tree sparkle brilliantly in the light, and the tree starts to rustle despite the lack of wind, as if it had a will of its own.

“Oh no! Get down quick, Lutz!”

The instant I heard my brothers call out, the branch beneath me starts to violently shake. I had been leaning forward just a bit to grab onto another branch, so I lose my footing entirely as the branch bucks under me. With one hand, I cling desperately to the branch I had been holding onto, dangling in mid-air.

“Whoa!!”

I reach up with my other hand and grab tightly onto the branch, trying to stop myself from falling.

“No, don’t, Lutz! Let go! Get down from there now!”

As soon as I started to let go, the branch suddenly went limp, warmed by the heat from both my hands. With a crack, it snaps off. The paru fruit and I plummet towards the ground.

“WAAAAaaaaa—”

The ground beneath the tree is covered in deep, deep snow, and since I was falling feet first after having been dangling from the tree, I land without any serious injury. Around us, other people are jumping out of the other paru trees scattered here and there.

The time for gathering is over.

The trees shine brilliantly in the light, their countless leaves rustling loudly. They stretch skyward, growing taller as if they’re chasing after the light. Soon, they tower over even the thickest, fullest trees in the forest. Despite there still not being any wind, their branches whip through the air, almost like a woman’s long hair swirls around her as she shakes her head. The unpicked paru fruit fly off in all directions as their branches flick about in the shimmering light.

As soon as the fruit all fly off, the paru trees start shrinking as if they’re melting away, and soon vanish into nothingness. Unlike any other tree in the forest, these are magic trees, which can only be found on clear days in the middle of the winter.

“It’s over.”

“Let’s go home.”

Everyone gathers up their bags full of paru fruit and heads for home. Every household is going to spend the whole afternoon working on processing the fruit that they gathered. It’s hard, heavy work, but it’s still kind of fun.

“First off, let’s split these up.”

Now that it’s in the house, the fruit that was about the size of my face has gotten a little smaller and rounder now that its rind is melting away.

“Can you handle getting the bowl ready?”

“Yeah!”

We light the tip of a small stick on fire using the stove, then press it into the shell of the paru fruit. With a sharp crack, the skin just in that area splits open a little bit, and a milky white juice starts welling up through it. An amazingly sweet smell drifts out to fill the house, and I gulp as my mouth starts to water. So that we don’t lose a single drop of the juice, we’ve placed the fruit in a bowl.

This juice, and its sweet, sweet flavor, is extremely precious. I want to do nothing more than drink it all down in one go, but I’ve decided that I’m going to pace myself very, very carefully. For now, all I can do is swallow my saliva as my mouth keeps watering.

Once we’ve drained out all the juice from inside, the next step is to crush the fruit and extract all the oil from it. Paru oil can be used both for cooking and for fueling lamps, which makes these fruits extremely welcome in the middle of the winter. Once we’ve pressed all of the oil out, the remains of the fruit are very dry. Once they finish drying, they’re not really suitable for people to eat, but it makes for an excellent, nutritious feed for our chickens. Even better, it causes the flavor of the eggs to change a lot, which I’m also always happy for.

“May we come in?”

“Sorry to bother you...”

For a couple of days after that, we’ve had people constantly coming by, hoping to trade the dried-out fruit remains for eggs from our chickens. From my perspective, I don’t know what I’m going to do when we’ve traded everything away for chicken feed. The chickens will be very happy about this, but all of the eggs that I could have actually eaten are vanishing, right before my eyes.

Please, don’t bring us any more chicken feed. Bring me meat! While my older brothers tend to split the eggs evenly among us, they hog all the meat and I barely get any of it.

As I was contemplating my pending starvation, Maine and Tory come in, carrying with them some more fruit scraps. Inside their rough nilen bags are about two fruits’ worth of scraps.

“Lutz,” says Maine with an enormous smile as she holds out her bag in front of her, “can we trade these for some eggs?”

I really don’t want to, but my mother would be furious if I turned them away.

“We kinda already have enough chicken feed... do you maybe have any meat?”

“Meat?” “My older brothers eat all of it, so I don’t really get any for myself.”

During the winter, everyone is home nearly all the time, so my food winds up getting stolen from me a lot and I usually wind up staying hungry. I know that Tory and Maine can’t really do anything about it, but I let my frustration slip out anyway.

Tory gives a wry smile. “You’re not as strong as your brothers, so course they’re gonna steal from you,” she jokes, brushing past my dissatisfaction.

Maine, for some entirely unknown reason, shoves the bag right towards my face. “Hey, Lutz, why not eat this?”

“How the hell am I going to eat chicken feed?!”

I am completely blindsided by the fact that Maine, who I always treat so nicely, just suddenly told me to eat chicken feed. The sheer shock of it caused me to reflexively yell out, but Maine just stands there with a blank look on her face, head tilted to one side.

“...I guess it depends on how you cook it?”

“Huh?” “The fruit’s been squeezed totally dry, so you can’t eat it. It’s probably still tasty, though, so even these dried-out bits will be fine to eat if we just cook them right.”

Maine is saying these completely unbelievable things with a perfectly straight face. I instinctively glance over at Tory to see what her reaction is. There can’t be anyone who’d eat chicken feed. Tory, however, gives me a tired, worn-out smile and shrugs her shoulders a little bit. For some reason, Maine really does seem to want to eat paru fruit.

“You...! Do you know how wasteful it is to eat a paru?! You don’t just eat it, you squeeze out its juice and its oil and then give the rest to the chickens!! There’s no way that we’re just going to waste it by eating it!”

I don’t think there’s a single person in this house that lacks enough propriety that they’d turn to eating bird food. On top of that, taking something that we worked so hard to get and just eating it without making full use of it is unbelievable! I don’t think there’s a single person in this entire city who’d think of that except for Maine.

“Ummm... if you were going to give it to the chickens that would be okay, but you just said you have enough bird food, right? It’ll be okay to use this to fill us up instead, then.”

“Like I’m trying to say, people can’t eat something that’s so dried out!” “It only turned into something people can’t eat after all of the juice and oil was squeezed out of it. If we put some effort into it, we can definitely make it edible again!” “Maine, umm...”

My strength leaves me. Maine is saying such unbelievable things with such an earnestly smiling face! What’s this feeling? I feel like I’m not going to convince her no matter what I try to say. Is this helpless sort of feeling what they call a sense of defeat?

“Hey, Lutz,” says Tory, quietly. Now would have been the perfect time for her to remind her sister that bird food isn’t something that humans can eat, but instead she weakly hangs her head. “It’s kinda hard to believe,” she says, “but you really can make it edible. ...I was even really shocked when I found out how good it was.”

Eh? Seriously? She made you eat bird food, Tory?!

Somehow, Maine has already demonstrated this working in her own home. I see now, I guess I’m just arguing off of my own self-confidence, huh.

“Let’s try it out real quick, okay? Lutz, do you have any paru juice left over?”

As she talks, she puts some of the dried-out remains in a little bowl. She adds about two teaspoons’ worth of my share of the fruit juice, then blends it all together. She scoops some up onto her finger and sticks it into her mouth, then nods to herself in satisfaction.

“Open wide, Lutz!”

Not only is my precious fruit juice being used for this, but I’m about to be fed bird food. I think this is probably going to be terrible, but after seeing Maine taste it as if it were a completely ordinary thing to do, I hesitantly open my mouth. She scoops up a bunch of the yellow stuff onto her fingertip and puts it in my mouth. As I close my mouth again, a sweet flavor radiates through it.

Only a little bit of juice went into this, but it’s still so sweet and it doesn’t feel dried-out at all. Every year, I stretch out my share of the juice for as long as I can by drinking only just enough for me to taste it, but if I blend it with the leftovers from the squeezing, I guess I could eat a lot more sweet stuff, right?

“It really is sweet, see?” says Maine, chuckling to herself triumphantly. My older brothers, who had been looking on suspiciously from a distance, simultaneously jump in on us.

“It’s sweet?”

“It’s really sweet?” “Seriously? Lemme try, Lutz.”

All three of them charge forward, fingers outstretched, ready to scoop into the little bowl. I try to run away so that they can’t grab onto it, but with such a big difference in physique between us, I can’t escape. I can’t even dodge!

“Hey, let go! Stop pulling! Are older brothers only good for stealing their younger brother’s stuff?”

“My little brother’s things are my things!” “Sweet things should be shared with everyone.” “Ah-HA! Got it!”

I struggle in vain to resist the three of them, but they yank the bowl out of my reach. They take turns scooping the mix out of the bowl with their fingers. “Aaaaa!! My paru!!” I wail, but they completely ignore me. Soon, the bowl is completely empty.

“Whoa, tasty.”

“This was bird food, right?”

Just like mine did, all of their eyes go wide with disbelief, and they look over at Maine. She quickly looks to the side, shying away from all of the attention, but then says something even more unbelievable.

“Lutz, since we’re at your house, I can make it even better.”

“Seriously?!” shout all of us, simultaneously.

It’s completely natural for us to react like that. We’re all growing boys with healthy appetites, after all. Zasha, in particular, is the oldest, and he’s always saying there’s never enough food. Even if it is made from bird food, we are all extremely eager to have another tasty thing to eat.

“...Oh, although, I can’t do it if you guys don’t help. ...I’m not very strong.”

“Alright, leave it to me!” I reply. It’s immediately obvious that Maine is frail and weak. If she needs our help to make us something delicious, I will help with all of my might!

“Lutz, don’t hog her attention. Let me help too, Maine, I’m way stronger

than Lutz is.”

“Yeah, okay!” she says.

Suddenly, all of my brothers want to cooperate. I’m left wondering when it will ever be my turn for anything, but Maine looks absolutely delighted as she starts giving us orders.

“Okay, hmm. You two older brothers get a griddle ready on the stove. Lutz, you do the prep work, Ralph, you’re in charge of mixing. Ah, also, it would be really mean for everyone to only use Lutz’s juice, so everyone needs to share theirs! Come on, chip in, chip in.”

She claps her hands in a very mother-like fashion as she urges my older brothers on. Right now, Maine looks like an angel to me. With a single word, she saved me from having to give up all of my juice by myself.

“Lutz, get me two teaspoons of milk. Ralph, grab that spatula and start stirring this, please.”

Even though Maine is usually a huge hindrance, right now she’s looking extremely lively as she fires off instruction after instruction while everyone is moving around her. Zasha and Zeke have dragged the griddle on top of the stove and are working on getting it fired up. Ralph, spatula in hand, is vigorously mixing things together as Maine adds them into the bowl. I’m running here and there on Maine’s instructions, picking up the various things she says we need.

“Right, this is looking good. Next, do you have any butter?”

I run and get it for her. She uses a small spoon to take off a chunk of it, then climbs up on a chair next to the stove and slides it onto the griddle. Every one of our hearts skip a beat when they see what a precarious position she’s in, but she doesn’t seem to notice at all.

The butter on the griddle sizzles loudly as it shrinks away. A delicious scent fills the room, and I’m suddenly acutely aware of how hungry I’ve been getting. Maine reaches into the bowl Ralph’s been stirring with a larger spoon, and drops a spoonful of thick, muddy batter on top of the melted butter. As the batter hisses over the fire, the sweet scent of paru

mingles with the savoriness of the butter, and I'm almost overwhelmed. What she's making looks kind of like the potato pancakes my mother makes, but the scent is totally different.

"Alright, it's your turns, make them like that, please," she says.

After demonstrating how to make one, she passes off the cooking duties to my older brothers, who do not need a chair to reach the stove. Maine, from atop her chair, continues to give directions. That's fine, though. We understood what we had to do as soon as she showed us, and making her wobble on top of such a tall chair would be too much for us to do. Since it's way less dangerous for us to do the cooking, my older brothers immediately take her spoon and get to work.

"When the bubbles start to rise like that, that side's done. Start flipping them over, please!"

"Got it!" says Zasha.

At Maine's direction, he scoops them up with a spatula, one by one, and neatly flips them over, showing that the underside is now a wonderfully cooked brown. They look so good that I almost start drooling.

"Alright, take them off, put them over there, and start more cooking in their place."

We gather up the finished things and put them to the side, then drop more butter and batter onto the pan. Whenever Maine said they were ready, we flipped them over and moved them to the plates.

Maine holds the first plate we finished with triumphantly, a huge smile on her face. "Voila! 'Simple bean curd hotcakes!'"²

I actually have no idea what she just said. I don't really know how I'm supposed to react, so I tilt my head to the side.

"...Huh? What did you say?"

"Um...", she says, blinking in surprise. Her face scrunches up for a moment, as if she's searching for the right words. "The basic parucakes are ready!"³

Steam wafts up from the plates of parucakes lined up along the table. I want to dig into them immediately.

“They’re hot, so be careful! Please, enjoy your meal~!”

Slowly, I take a bite. Shockingly, they’re even more delicious than I thought they were going to be. They’re light and fluffy, and don’t have even a trace of the dryness of bird food. Unlike potato pancakes, these are extremely sweet, even without adding any jam.

On top of that, since they’re stacked on each person’s dish one at a time, I don’t have to worry about my brothers taking them all!

“Hey, Lutz. If you make these, do you think you’ll be able to fill yourself up easily?”

“I do! Wow, Maine, you’re amazing.”

Since people keep coming over wanting to trade for eggs, we have a lot of paru leftovers. Our chickens make plenty of eggs for us, and if we can trade some of those for milk, then we should be able to have parucakes all through the winter.

“I’ve got some other ideas about how to cook the squeezed-out paru,” says Maine, “but I don’t have the strength to do them myself.”

“If you show us how to do it, we’ll make it for you!”

After that, Maine continued to come over and imprint on us new ways to cook delicious things every time the weather cleared up and we went to collect more paru. Thanks to Maine teaching us how to cook, I rarely went hungry that winter.

Maine is my savior, but she’s also very weak, so I want to help her any way I can.

I couldn’t have noticed at the time, I was so immersed in the joy of parucakes, but this would become a huge influence in my life.

*

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Everything has fantasy names in this series (like “nilen” being the stand-in for “linen”), so it’s not literally “rye bread”. However, the word used here is 黒パン (lit. “black bread”), which refers to rye bread without actually calling it rye. If we ever learn the in-universe name for rye, I’ll update this.

2. Specifically, the bean curd she’s referring to is okara, which is what’s left of a soybean after you make soy milk or tofu. It’s frequently used as animal feed, but is used in a lot of East Asian cuisine. It’s dry and tasteless ordinarily, but you can make it into porridge or add it to baked goods.

3. She swapped out the n in pancake パンケーキ for a ru パルケーキ.

Chapter 14: Otto's Assistant

It seems that, in this town, whenever the weather clears up during the winter everyone always goes out to pick paru. Last time this happened, my father had a day off from work, so he went to go pick paru with Tory, but today he's busy with his job. As I started wondering if that meant that we were going to give up on paru after all, I noticed my mother gathering up her coat.

Paru are valuable winter fruit, To my eye, they're a fruit that contains a syrupy coconut milk, olive oil, and a sweet-ish sort of bean curd. Since I figured out that the remains of the fruit after all of the oil has been squeezed out can be used as a good substitute for bean curd, I've been able to expand the house's menu a little bit. Thanks to that, it looks like my mother's been increasingly motivated lately.

The bean curd hotcakes I made the other day at Lutz's house were the first sweets I've had in ages. Lutz's family raises chickens in their house, so they have a lot of eggs for trade, which means they have access to a ready supply of milk. I'm envious. Between the abundance of ingredients and the extra manpower that all the boys provide, it's way easier to cook at Lutz's house. The bean curd hotcakes... ah, I called them parucakes, didn't I? The parucakes left everyone deeply moved, and I was able to use paru oil, egg yolk, and a pinch of salt to make mayonnaise. With that and some more salt for seasoning, I was able to make something kind of like a potato salad, which also quickly became very popular.

...It looks like my reincarnation has made Lutz's and his brother's lives better, at least.

There's so many ways to use a paru that I want to get as many of them here in my house as I can. Unfortunately, I'm absolutely useless on any sort of trip, but I still want to cheer everyone on if I can.

Tory, fight! Fight! Mother, win! Win!!

However, when Tory and my mother head for the forest, there's still the problem of what to do with me. In any case, I have no strength, I'm sickly,

and I'm worse than useless. There's literally zero way that I can make a trip into the forest in the dead of winter. To make things worse, they seem to think that I might get up to some sort of trouble if they leave me at home by myself, so it seems they absolutely can't leave me to watch the house.

Isn't that kind of mean?

My father eats his breakfast, pondering deeply, as he gets ready for work. Suddenly, he claps his hands together.

"I've got it! Maine, how about you come with me to the gates today?"

I'd go with my father to the gate. Tory and my mother would go to the forest to gather paru. Then, on their way back, they'd pick me up from the gate. If they do that, the two of them can go pick fruit without worrying about me, and I won't be left home alone.

"Ah, that's a good idea," says my mother. "Let's do that! Tory, let's head out. We'll leave Maine with your father today."

"Okay!" says Tory. "Maine, we'll come by and pick you up later."

As my mother praises my father for his good idea, she gathers up everything she needs in the blink of an eye and leads Tory out of the house. Paru gathering seems to be something that only happens before noon, so it's critical that everyone gets there as soon as possible. This is probably because everyone snaps all the fruit up in a heartbeat. It is such a delicious and useful fruit, after all.

"Well then, shall we head to the gates?"

Being baby-sat at the gates, huh... Well, it's a change of pace from being here in the house all the time. If Otto's there, then I can probably get him to teach me some new letters, too...

Frankly, I am starting to get really tired of being inside this house. Ever since I failed at making pseudo-papyrus, I have been reduced to only being able to do one of two things: play with the slate and make baskets. I never could have thought that, without books, I would have so much free time and so little idea of what to do with it.

By the way, lately, I've had "Come, Spring!"¹ and "Radio Calisthenics"² playing in my head. Until spring finally comes around, I can't go outside and I can't work on making my clay tablets.

Also, I've started doing radio calisthenics every morning so that I can build up enough strength to start going outside. My family has been looking at me strangely, but I think that it's very important for me to do everything I can to get in better shape. To be painfully honest, my physical condition wasn't something I really paid much attention to back in Japan, so I don't know exactly where I should be starting from in my exercises.

"Oh, Daddy. Is Otto going to be there today?"

"Ahh, I think so?" "Yay!"

Now I'm actually looking forward to being baby-sat at the gates. I cheerfully go about my own preparations. Since I'm going out, I'll need to bring my slate. I layer on my clothes and pull on my coat, then I slide the slate into the tote bag I wove earlier this winter. With that, I'm ready to go.

"Let's go, Daddy!"

"...Maine, you really like Otto a lot, don't you?" "Yeah! I love him," I reply.

After all, he gave me this slate to help me learn the alphabet, and he's my teacher (or so I've unilaterally decided). Wouldn't it be impossible for me not to like him? Honestly, I probably like him more than I like my father. In the interest of maintaining harmonious human relations, though, I clamp my mouth closed so that I don't actually say that last bit.

"Cold!" I exclaim, as we step outside.

The air itself is frigid. The faintest of winds is blowing, and that alone is enough to cause a painful chill to cut straight through to my bones. My face is tingling so intensely that, even despite my laziness, I'm thinking that I'm going to have to figure out how to make some kind of moisturizing cream out of some of the paru oil we get today.

On top of that, the snow is so deep that I can barely walk. There's probably some knack to walking on top of snow, but I didn't grow up in a

snowy part of the country so I don't know it. After only two steps, my tiny child legs were stuck deep in the snow, and I couldn't move them no matter what I tried. I have no idea what to do next.

"Daaaaddy! How do I walk in this?"

My father turns around, a startled expression on his face, and walks back towards me, his arms out to the sides for balance as his legs sink into the snow. "...It's okay, I got you," he says. He hangs my tote bag from his wrist, then picks me up by my sides, lifts me up high, and deposits me on his shoulders. "Be careful not to fall!"

"Whoa... so high!"

I'm way higher up than I was before, even when Ralph carried me on his shoulders. I don't, however, feel like I'm in any danger of falling. My father, the soldier, has broad, firm shoulders, providing both a sense of stability and a sense of security. He's very different from my other father, who I think was a salaryman in a sales department.

"Hold on as tight as you can, okay?"

"Okaaay!"

It's been a long time since I rode piggyback, so I'm a little bit excited. I cling tightly to my father's head as he starts trudging through the snow. There's a narrow pathway cut through the snow, but it doesn't seem to have been made with a shovel. Instead, it looks like it was made by people carefully following in each other's footsteps, one by one, as they left for the main street.

"Maine, you should know, Otto's already married."

We had been walking in silence for a while when those words suddenly tumbled out of his mouth. He seems to have been considering what to say for a while.

Huh? Did I... say something about wanting to marry him at some point? I know I didn't say anything about wanting to marry my father, though.

"Ummmm... so, what?"

“Well, Otto’s the kind of man who doesn’t think of anyone but his wife.”

What kind of parent uses this kind of diversion on his five-year-old daughter, you idiot? Would it be okay if I played the straight man and smacked him on the head now?

“Okay, but what’s wrong?”

“.....”

Argh, really?! Now you go quiet? You’re such a pain! I’m not going to play along, father. Do you really think that I’m going to say something like “but Daddy you’re so much more amazing” or “but Daddy I love you so much more” right now?

“Oh,” I say, “are you saying that since Otto is the kind of man who loves his wife so much, he’s really amazing?”

“...No.”

Sulking fiercely, my father continues trudging forward in silence. After some time, we finally arrive at the gate, me still riding atop the shoulders of my troublesome father.

“Good morning, sir,” says the soldier stationed at the gate, bowing his head for some strange reason. After a moment, I remember that bowing your head in greeting is one of the social customs here. Then, he bows his head again, maybe for me, perched on top of my father’s shoulders.

“Lihit,” says my father, “this is my daughter Maine. I’ll be leaving her in the night duty room until the afternoon, when her mother comes to get her on her way back from picking paru.”

“Understood, sir.” “Maine, go to the night duty room. Otto’s in there, so that’ll be fine, right?”

Whoaaa, that sounded almost petulant. Huh? Maybe... is my father so jealous of Otto that he’s getting childish? Are human relations breaking down here?

“I’m only really looking forward to learning some new letters from him, you know,” I say. “...You don’t need Otto for that.”

Sorry, Otto. I tried to smooth things over, but I think I might have only made it worse.

At the beginning of this whole mess, I really was only excited about learning new letters, but I have no idea where my father's thoughts have been wandering to.

"I'm coming in," says my father, knocking on the door to the night duty room as he opens it and walks in. The night room is lit by both a brilliantly glowing fire in the fireplace and a lamp shining on a desk. It's way brighter than it is back home. Otto is sitting at a desk close to the fire, filling out paperwork.

"Otto!" I say. "Corporal... and Maine? Why's she here?"

"She'll be staying here while her mother's gathering paru. Take care of her."

He tersely... no, sharply explains the situation while he lowers me down from his shoulders. Otto's eyes go wide and he glances back and forth between his pile of paperwork and my father. Clearly, he's been shaken by having being abruptly ordered to be a babysitter.

"Huh? Umm, but, I... need to finish the budget and the financial report..."

"Maine," says my father, completely ignoring Otto's protests, "it's warm in here. Stay here and take care not to catch a cold." "Yes, Daddy!" I wave goodbye to him as he leaves the room.

I turn towards Otto. "I'm sorry, Otto."

"Huh?" "You know, I was super happy when you gave me the slate, and I'm even more happy that I get to see you again." "Oh, that's good. I'm also happy to see you again, but..."

He gives me a bit of an awkward smile, then looks a little confused, as if he's wondering why I needed to apologize for that.

"I was kinda praising you earlier, and my daddy started to sulk."

"...Oh, boy..." "I'll be really quiet until my mommy comes and picks me up, so could you teach me some new letters?"

From the parchment and ink that's spread out on top of the desk, it's obvious that he was in the middle of working through some paperwork. I don't want to be too much of a hindrance, but I'm not going to let this chance to learn more letters slip away.

"Sure, why not? Since it's you, Maine, I know you'll practice quietly..."

I quickly take out my slate. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as Otto writes out new letters, mumbling to himself. At this point, I've lost count of the many hours I spent playing with it by myself, so by now I feel a strange sense of confidence.

"Maine, if you get another fever, your father's going to be even more upset than he is now, so sit over here."

With a wry smile, he shuffles his things over, giving me his seat in front of the fireplace. I completely agree with his reasoning, so I don't restrain myself too much as I sit myself down.

"Thank you! I can definitely practice here."

These letters seem to be part of an alphabet. It's not a syllabic script like hiragana, or an logographic system like kanji. This feels like an alphabet where both pronunciation and meaning change depending on how you spell things.³

For a while, the room was quiet, with only the clacking sound of pencil on slate and the scratching sound of pen on parchment breaking through the stillness.

When I feel like I've memorized the letters in front of me, I look up from my slate. Otto is looking at his parchment, deep in concentration as he works through his calculations. Next to him is some sort of abacus-like calculation device, but I have no idea how to use it. When I was in elementary school, we practiced using an abacus to add and subtract, but I don't know if the same methods apply to this thing.

When it seems that he's come to a break in his calculations, I ask him a question.

"Otto, what's this?"

“I’m working on the financial report and drawing up the budget. We have to come up with a budget for the year during the winter and submit it before spring comes around, but there aren’t very many soldiers who are good at math. I’m the one with the most confidence in my ability to keep track of money, so the task of doing the budget and the financial report falls on me.” “They’ve given you a really difficult job, huh.”

When I look over the parchment, I can’t really read the words, but there’s three columns of numbers lined up next to them. The first two look like price and quantity, and the last one seems to be the multiplied total, I think. Is this an equipment requisition form?

As I ponder, I notice a mistake in the calculations.

“Otto, isn’t this wrong?”

“Eh?” “Here, this is 75 and this is 30, right? So, isn’t that 2,250? Ah! This one’s wrong too.”

I can read the numbers, but I don’t actually know how to describe multiplication in this language, so I have to describe things in a roundabout fashion.

“Eh? I thought you couldn’t read! How can you do these calculations?”

“Heh heh heh, my mom taught me numbers when we went to the town market! So, I can look at the numbers, and I can do the math, but I can’t read any of this part over here.”

When I say that I can’t read the words next to each entry, Otto starts to ponder something. “Nah... but maybe...” he mumbles to himself, as he broods.

“...Maine, I have to fix this. Could you help me out?”

Is it really okay for me to take over something like this? Not only is this departmental information, and probably a breach of security, but isn’t letting a child help you out with something like this really bad? Rather, aren’t you really desperate, since you’re asking for help for a child, albeit one with surprising math skill?

Not only did he say he had to fix it, he's asking for help from a child. This really is abnormal. Since he's putting himself on the line like this, I feel like I want to help him as best as I can.

On top of that, he's got something I really want, and I finally have the bargaining point I was searching for.

"Okay. I'll help you out, if you give me slate pencils and keep helping me learn the alphabet."

"Huh?"

His eyes go wide again. He clearly didn't expect a little girl like me to suddenly thrust conditions like that on him. This was exactly the response I was expecting, so, with a little chuckle, I explain the present situation.

"Like I said, my mom taught me all my numbers. I still don't know letters, though, so I want you to teach them to me."

"Teaching you is fine, but... slate pencils? Those aren't very expensive, you know?"

Just like Otto says, slate pencils are available for sale in the town market. In reality, they're something that I actually got my mother to buy for me. So, I know they're pretty easy to go out and buy. However, it's a lot harder for me, personally, to obtain them.

"My mommy bought some for me a while ago, but she doesn't really want to buy me any more."

"Why's that?" "It's probably because I spend so much time playing with the slate. I use them all up as soon as she buys them for me..."

"Ahahahahahaha!"

Since I spend countless hours every day playing with the slate, the pencils wear down to nubs very quickly. Since I don't get any pocket money for myself, you could say that finding a way to get more slate pencils is a matter of life and death for me.

"A... anyhow!" I say. "My time isn't so cheap that I'd work for free, you know!"

“...Your time is still really cheap, though,” says Otto, smiling wryly.

Otto has now officially become my writing tutor. It looks like I wasn't wrong about these being equipment requisition forms, but it looks like he's in the middle of validating the math on someone else's paperwork.

“What should I do?” I ask. “Could you check to see if anything here is wrong? In any event, I don't know where the errors might be hiding. It's going to take a while to get through all of this.”

It should be obvious, but there aren't any computers here, so drawing up these documents takes time, but going through and checking every single calculation in this document is more work than one person alone can handle.

“There's other soldiers that can do math, huh?”

“...That's true, but I can do it, and I've got a pretty good reason to do it too...”

Somehow, it looks like Otto has some sort of circumstances behind why he became a soldier. I really want some juicy information, so I'm itching to ask him to go into more detail, but there's a lot of validation work ahead of us to be done. I sit tight, knowing that there will be plenty of time for gossip when I see him next time.

“Maine, do you want to use the calculator?”

“No thanks, I don't know how to use it, so I'm fine for now. I'll work things out on my slate.”

It's way easier for me to do calculations on my erasable slate than it would be to do so on a blank form. I start to work through the numbers by hand, using my slate. Numbers were drilled into my head from such an early age, though, that the first symbol that pops into my head is “9”. With some effort, I make sure that I'm properly using the numerals of this world.

“Whoa, this is much easier. I'm moved! You've seriously saved me. I never thought that validating those calculations could go so quickly! If you can do this much math, Maine, you could definitely be a merchant some

day. If you do, I can introduce you to the merchant's guild, okay?"

It seems that for several years, Otto has had to compile all of the budgets and make all of the financial reports all by himself. Even though all we did today was checking everything, Otto is still so deeply grateful. If I were to be in a position to make a lot of books, then the best way to turn that into a bookstore would be to join the merchant's guild. I've made an important connection in a really unexpected place. On top of that, I've earned some recognition as Otto's invaluable assistant.

"Maine, if you want to learn how to write, then I'll help you beat them into your skull, okay? If you do that, then you can help me write up all the papers, too."

"Really?! Woohoo!!" "Huh? That got you excited?"

Otto's eyes may be going wide with shock, but if he's going to seriously teach me the alphabet, then it's only natural that I'd be happy, right? And if I'm helping out with official paperwork, that means I'll get to touch parchment, right? And write letters onto a page with real ink, right? Isn't that such a joyous thing?

"Maine, sorry to keep you waiting."

"Let's go home!"

Today I did more math than I've done in a long while, so it was a great workout for my brain. I'm so mentally fatigued that the inside of my head feels numb. It's a pleasant feeling. This was an incredibly productive day.

"Thanks, Otto! I'm really grateful for your help."

"Yours too, Maine. You saved me a lot of time." "See you in a bit, Daddy! Good luck with your work!" "Yep," he says, tersely.

It's been a few hours, but my father is still in a bad mood. Or maybe, did it get even worse?

Why?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. "Haru yo, Koi" (春よ来い, "Come, Spring!") is a 90s JPop song.
2. Radio calisthenics is basically a nationwide exercise program that's broadcast throughout Japan to help people stay active.
3. "Alphabet", in a proper linguistic sense, refers to something like the English alphabet, where each letter corresponds to a specific phoneme, and multiple letters are strung together to form full syllables. The various forms of Japanese writing aren't actually true alphabets, but are either syllabic scripts where each character represents a full syllable or logographic scripts where each character may have one or more syllables and represents an entire concept.

Chapter 15: Tory's Hair Ornaments

Cute things are cute, but... it looks a little unsatisfactory to me. In Japan, when kids visit shrines on Shichi-Go-San¹, the kimono and dresses that they wear are all very showy and colorful so that they'll look good for their photos. Or, at least, that's the image the photography studios keep feeding us in their ads.

"What do you think, Maine? Isn't it cute?"

If you wanted to, you could make it a little bit more fluttery, or maybe add some more decorations. Either of those things would make it so much cuter...

I may be saying that to myself deep in my heart, but my mother looks so proud of her handiwork and Tory looks so pleased with her new dress that I guess it's already more than good enough. This isn't an outfit that you're going to have a picture taken of for your own self-satisfaction, this is something that's going to be worn to a temple. It's entirely possible that wearing something flashy would be frowned upon. I don't think I should really comment on Tory's clothing right now, since I don't actually know any of the things that are apparently common sense in this world.

I have found one thing I can comment on, though: her hair. Regular care may have made it glossy and smooth, but she always wears it in exactly the same way, in a single thick three-part braid behind her. If we were to change up her hairstyle for her baptism ceremony, I wonder what people would think of some tasteful hair ornaments.

However, whatever I do, I can't actually get started until I learn what the customs are here. Maine was a very young child, after all, and she didn't really have any memories of baptism ceremonies at all.

"Tory," I say, "it's really cute! ...But, what about your hair? You've got to decide what sort of hairstyle you want for your baptism ceremony."

"I was going to just go like this, though...?"

...Tory, that's not good at all. This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, put a

little more thought into your fashion choices.

Unintentionally, my head drops down in exasperation. I pull myself together and find a new angle to continue my questioning. If Tory's hairstyle isn't going to change, maybe we can add some sort of decoration to it.

"Ummm... so, what about ornaments? Are you going to use any?"

"Oh, hmm... it's summertime, so maybe I'll pick some flowers somewhere?" "Whoa, don't do that! Your dress is too cute for that!"

She's just casually talking like she's going to pick whatever flowers she manages to find lying around! Haven't you heard of coordinating an outfit?! ...Ahh, of course not.

Here, it seems like it's weird for a child to wear their hair up. It's okay for it to be braided, though, or to have ornaments in it. If Tory doesn't have any, it should be okay for me to make them for her. I'd be able to make some sort of lacework, I think. I've got plenty of time until summer, so I don't think I'll have any problems.

"I'll do something! Leave it to me, Tory. I'll definitely make you even cuter."

Immediately after I made that declaration, I suddenly realize that we don't have any needles for lacework. My mother has large needles that she uses for knitting, but they're too large for me to make lace with.

Wh... what should I do?!

My father's the only one in the family who seems like he'd be able to make things like tools. Tory may have made my hair sticks, but the one who shaved it smooth so it was easy to use, then stained it with oil was actually my father.

I surreptitiously sneak a glance at my father, trying to gauge his mood. It's already been a few days since I'd gone to the gate and Otto had agreed to help me learn to write, but my father has been in a pretty foul mood ever since. He doesn't really look like he's in the mood to be pestered, but I don't think he'll get less angry at me if I just leave him alone.

Honestly, my father is being pretty childish, so it's up to me to be the adult here. If I read between the lines, it's almost like he wants me to say something. If I fawn on him a little bit and pester him to do something for me, I think I might be able to not only get him to make me some needles, but also cheer him up, killing two birds with one stone.

"Daddy, daddy!" I say. "What?"

"Daddy, you're really good at making stuff, right? You're the one who made Tory's doll, right?" "Y... yeah, that's right." He clears his throat. "Ahh, what is it, do you want a doll of your own?"

He's keeping an expression on his face like he's still angry with me, but there's a little glimmer of anticipation in his eyes as he glances over at me.

"Nuh-uh," I say. "I want some knitting needles."

"Needles? Can't you use the ones your mother has? I think she'll lend them to you, right?"

As he answered me, a supremely dejected expression falls over his face. Waves of misery pour off of him, like he's had enough just wants to smooth things over already.

He waves his hand, shooing me, as if he's telling me to just go away in a manner that's not very becoming of a parent. At the very least, I'm going to make him hear me out.

"I need needles that are way smaller than the ones Mommy has. I want needles that can knit thread, not yarn. ...Daddy, these need to be really skinny, and I think making them would be difficult. Can you do it?"

I look up at him with glistening, upturned eyes, hands clasped in front of my chest, in the cutest begging pose I can possibly make. I don't know if the Japanese standards of 2-D cuteness apply in this world, but there's no doting parent in any world that doesn't find their own daughter adorable... so I think this is probably cute enough. Whether it's due to my cuteness or not, my father scratches at his stubbly chin, contemplating.

"Hmm... is wood okay?"

“Yeah! Can you do it?” “I’ll try.”

His fatherly pride stimulated a little bit, he immediately stands up and heads towards the storage room. After rummaging around for a while, he comes back out with a few different knives and some wood, then sits down and starts to whittle. In his experienced hands, the work goes very quickly. The knife whispers as it shaves away at the wood, and in the blink of an eye all of the bark has been stripped off, leaving only the dense, hard core. He looks closely at the knitting needles, then, skillfully and carefully, starts whittling the wood down into the same shape.

“If those needles are sized for wool,” he asks, “does this look about right for thread?”

“Umm, can you make them a little bit skinnier?” “Like this?” “Like that!”

With the proper size now determined, he changes to another knife, and starts to carve the hook ends of the knitting needles. I can’t say he’s as good as a real craftsman, but this is something that I can’t do myself at all, so I praise him anyway.

“Amazing, Daddy! They’re already looking great. Do you think that when you’re done, you can polish them really smooth and oil them so that they don’t catch any thread? I’d really really appreciate it.”

“Sure, leave it to me.”

Being praised by his daughter has brought back a lot of his fatherly confidence, it seems. He carefully polishes each needle, in fine spirits.

Heh, just as planned.

While a dark smile flickers over my face, Tory beams angelically, the very picture of pure innocence.

“Maine,” she says, “looks like Dad’s finally in a good mood again. That’s a relief.”

“Yeah, yeah, it really is!”

Don’t say anything about how I was the reason my dad was in a bad mood. Definitely don’t say anything about how I thought fawning over my

father was troublesome, so I left him alone without bothering to read the mood. I'm just a little girl, after all, so please treat me as if I don't know anything about bad moods.

My father's still been working hard on polishing the needles. It looks like they're almost ready to be used, so I start looking for thread. The ample stockpile of thread that my mother had prepared to use for Tory's dress has almost all dwindled away. There should be some sort of thread available that isn't the unbleached white thread that my mother used to make the cloth for the dress. However, the colorful threads that were used to make the sash and the trimmings aren't in long enough pieces to really make cloth out of.

"Mommy, can I have some threads dyed this color?"

"What do you want to do?"

My mother clearly never thought that I'd ask for thread, so her eyes momentarily grow wide with surprise before she puts on a dubious frown.

"I thought I'd make some 'lacework'," I reply. "Eh?"

"I want to make something to put in Tory's hair."

My mother back in Japan didn't just turn advertisements into paper baskets. She kept bouncing around, getting swept up in one kind of handicraft after another. It wasn't any of her business, but she wanted to get me into hobbies that weren't just reading books, so she dragged me behind her as she went through this crafting boom. In other words, my list of miscellaneous crafting skills is rather large.

Really, among all the handicrafts on my list, lacework is one of the ones that can make a useful finished product. I'm actually quite confident that I'll be able to make hair ornaments, assuming I have the tools and materials. My life as Urano may be over, but I have no idea what sorts of knowledge I have that might be useful in the future.

However, my mother in this world has no knowledge of my former identity, so she seems to disapprove of my request for some thread. There's no doubt in my mind that she's thinking that I'm going to do

something useless again, so anything she hands over to me will wind up being wasted.

“If you’re making hair ornaments, those aren’t really going to be useful except at the baptismal ceremony, you know? It’s a waste to use up our thread on such an inconsequential decoration. Flowers are more than enough for a hair ornament. Tory’s already cute, you don’t need to make her any cuter.”

“If you can make something cuter, you must! Cuteness is justice!” I cry, clenching my fist tightly.

My mother, for whatever reason, lets out a sigh, then turns away as if the conversation is already over. I quickly reach out and grab her skirt.

“Hey, Mommy,” I beg, “I’d be okay with just these leftovers here. Daddy worked hard to make these needles for me, and I really want to use them. Let me just try, please?”

I look over at my father, trying to hint that those needles might wind up being worthless. If he got my meaning, or if he realized that his work might be in vain, or maybe even if he was afraid that I’d lose all of my new-found respect for him, he speaks up in my defense.

“It’s rare for Maine to take this much interest in sewing, so what do you think about just letting her have the remnants?” My mother ponders for a bit. “...Hm, I guess you’re right,” she says, a reluctant expression on her face.

She picks out a few threads and hands them over to me. They’re short enough that it might actually be difficult to use them.

“Woohoo! Thanks, Mommy! I love you, Daddy!”

I throw up my hands in celebration. My father looks at me with exaggerated pleasure, grinning with his mouth almost hanging open. He suddenly puts way more strength into polishing the knitting needles, a huge smile on his face. If I may be perfectly honest, it’s kind of creepy.

His mood does seem to be a lot better, though. He’s acting a little weird, so... it’ll be better if I just leave him alone, right?

My father gives me the needles, which have been stuffed full of his overbearing affection. I immediately get to work weaving lace. I'm going to make a lot of tiny lace flowers.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly...

Much like my failed attempts to make pseudo-papyrus, making lace involves a lot of tight, tiny weaving and a lot of patience. Even if I acknowledge it, though, because the flower that I've been working on is so small, it took me about fifteen minutes to finish a single one. I let the yellow flower roll off my hand and onto the table, then start working on the next one. Tory looks at the little lace flower admiringly, then peers at it closely, tilting her head to one side with a doubtful expression on her face.

"Isn't it kinda too small?"

"I'm going to put a lot of them together as decoration." "Huh..."

If I made a big one, it would be really bad if I started losing interest before I was finished, right?

I keep the real reason to myself. I really let my big mouth get away from me when I started talking about hair ornaments, so I really need to make sure I finish something, which is why I decided to use a design that I can give up on halfway and still wind up with a usable result, like a collection of tiny flowers. Truthfully, back when I was Urano, I'd always decide I didn't like working on huge designs and wind up giving up halfway through. I need to limit how much that might hurt me.

"I thought about making lace or ribbon, but I don't think I could connect these threads since they're not very long. Plus, it would be weird if the color changed partway through, right? So I'm going to make a bunch of tiny flowers."

"Wow, Maine, you really thought this through." "Of course! It's cause I'm doing it for you."

I thought through many things before starting this. The final product is going to be made out of whatever I get done in the end, so I can finish it

even when I get tired of working on it. Plus, this isn't going to waste any thread, since I can always finish up my current flower and start a new one of a different color when I start to run out.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly...

Once I've finished making a few more tiny flowers, I feel like someone's watching me. I glance up and see that my work has piqued my mother's curiosity, and she's carefully watching what I'm doing with my hands. My mother is good enough at sewing that she's thought of as a "beautiful" woman by this place's standards, and it looks like she's pretty interested in my handiwork. She picks up one of my completed flowers and rolls it around in the palm of her hand.

"...This doesn't seem to be too difficult," she says. "You already knit a lot with wool, Mommy, so if you learn a few patterns I think you'd be way better at making these than I am, right? Want to try?"

I hand over my needles. My mother starts to knit, her motions fluid even as she studies the flowers. She occasionally picks one up and rolls it around in her fingers, confirming the way they're woven. In the blink of an eye, she's already finished one.

Whoa. As expected of the sewing skills of a beautiful woman. Just by looking at how something's stitched, she figured out how to make it herself. She's so different from me. I had to be taught how to do this step by step, grumbling the entire time.

"Amazing, Mommy."

"Well, I'm amazed you knew how to make something like this, Maine," she says. "I've knitted scarves and sweaters, but I never thought to knit decorations like this."

Everyone in this world has their hands so full with just surviving that nobody has the spare time to think about decoration. And, if nobody's making it, then maybe lacework itself is something that nobody's seen before. I was raised in a world where sewing decorations onto clothing was only natural, so I knew about it, but it looks like even tiny decorations like these aren't really known of here.

“So, Maine, now that we’ve made a lot of these flowers, how are you going to decorate Tory’s hair?”

It seems like my mother can’t tell how all the little flowers rolling around on the table are going to be assembled into a finished product. I need to explain things to her in the simplest possible way I can think of.

“Ummm... so we take these scraps of fabric and make them into a circle, and then sew the flowers on one by one. It’ll look like a bouquet of flowers after that, right? Then, we wrap that around a ‘hairpin’, and... wait, ‘hairpin’?!”

In the middle of my explanation, all of the blood suddenly drains from my face. My mother jumps, startled, as I suddenly raise my voice.

“Maine, what are you yelling about all of a sudden?”

“...Oh no, what do I do... I don’t have a ‘hairpin’, huh...”

This is really bad! There’s no hairpins in this world, or at the very least I haven’t seen any in this house. I haven’t seen any elastic hairbands either. This is a world where everyone ties their hair back with string. How the hell am I going to finish this off?!

“D... D-d-d... Daddyyyy!”

I immediately abandon my plan to leave my father alone. I rush over to him, taking up my begging posture again. Describing a hairpin by words alone is going to be difficult, so I take out my slate and draw a picture as I explain it to him.

“I need one side of it to be pointy, like my hair sticks, and then the other side needs to be flat, like this, with a little hole drilled into it. It’s kinda like my hair sticks, but shorter. Can you do it?!”

“Sure, this is actually simpler than those knitting needles.” “Really?! Daddy, you’re amazing! Now more than ever, you’re the best!!”

I hug him tightly in a gratuitous display of overflowing gratitude. “Heh heh heh, leave it to me,” he says, quietly. It seems like he still feels the need to compete with Otto.

My father cheerfully whittles a somewhat short hairpin for me. I sew together the lace mini-bouquet, then thread it through the hole in the hairpin, kind of like I'm sewing on a button.

"Alright, done! Tory, put on your new dress and come over here!"

Tory puts on her summer dress, then comes over to sit in the chair closest to the fire. I scoot my own chair over behind her, then kick off my shoes and climb up to stand on top of it. I undo her braid, comb it out, then loosely weave together hair from both sides of her head. Tory's hair is naturally wavy and fluffy, like it's permed, so I bring it back and weave it so it's half-up.² This hairstyle on her gives off an amazingly showy atmosphere.

I tie up the center of the braid tightly with a simple cord, then stick the hairpin through the knot so that it won't fall off. Against Tory's blue-green hair, the little flowers of blue, yellow, and white seem to shine.

"Yep, cute!" I say. "Wow, really!" says my mother. "You look very cute, Tory."

"Maine, you're pretty skilled with your hands," says my father. "You might not be strong, but we can probably find you a job that needs nimble fingers like yours."

Tory smiles shyly as the family admires her, turning this way and that to show off. She reaches up to feel the hairpin, but after a little while she puffs her cheeks out in frustration.

"Maine," she says, "you put everything in the back, so I can't see it at all, you know?"

"I guess so, but... I can't really help you there." "But, I don't really know what I look like right now."

We don't have any mirrors in this house, so there's no real way for me to show her what she looks like. I think about what I should do for a little while as Tory's face grows unhappier and unhappier. I try to show her on my own head, pulling the mini-bouquet out of her hair and sticking it into mine, next to my own hair sticks.

“It looks kind of like this! What do you think?”

As soon as she sees the hairpin in my hair, Tory cheers loudly. “Whoa, cute! Amazing! Hey, Mom. Does my hair look like that?”

“Well, Maine’s hair is straighter and all done up, and the colors of the threads we used match your hair much better. It definitely suits you more, Tory.” “Ahh, really... I see! Hee hee hee...”

Her cheeks flush red and she smiles so wide that it looks like she might crack her face in two. She pulls her hairpin from my hair.

“Thanks, everyone! I’m super happy.”

With spring just around the corner, we have made Tory a perfectly coordinated outfit. If I’m not mistaken, she’s easily going to be the most eye-catching girl at this summer’s baptismal ceremony.

After that, my mother got really into doing her own lacework, and the needles my father made for me suddenly disappeared into my mother’s sewing kit.

...Well, that’s okay, I guess.

*

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to “seven-five-three”.

2. Like this, probably. (I had to look it up to make sure I got the description right, so I figured I should link the reference.)

Chapter 16: Bring Me To The Forest

The snow in the forest has begun to melt, and the tiny sprouts of new plants have begun to appear. That's what Tory told me, when she came back from there. The children have started heading to the forest again to forage, which means that my long, idle hibernation where I had nothing to read and too much time on my hands is over at last.

Finally, I can make my clay tablets! I really want to head to the forest as well, so that I can get to work.

Tory said that there's still a lot of snow left, walking is difficult due to treacherous footing, and there's not very much out there to gather right now. However, I don't particularly care if there's a lot of stuff to gather or there's nothing at all.

What I'm after is slimy, clay-like earth, which means excavation. If I can just get to the forest, I've already won.

Of course, there's no way that anyone would let me head out to the forest by myself. I need to get Tory to supervise me. So, I've drawn up close to her in order to beg for her kindness.

"Please, Tory! I wanna go to the forest too, and make friends with the other kids. Could you take me along with you, please?"

"No way, you can't even walk that far."

Her answer hasn't changed at all. If she's going to keep having this little confidence in me, I'm facing total defeat here.

"I've gotten a little stronger! If I can't go with you, I can wait for you at the gates! Pleeease!"

Tory hesitates. I've been doing radio calisthenics every day, eating as much as I can, and going out with Tory when she goes downstairs to the well to wash the dishes. I've worked hard to boost my strength, and I think I'm just about ready.

"...If Dad says it's okay," she says.

Giving up on just shooing me away, she foists responsibility off on my father. Practically, though, if I were to end up waiting at the gate, I was going to need to ask my father anyway, so this was inevitable. Next, I must persuade my father.

“Daddy, can I go to the forest? I haven’t gotten sick in a while!”

“Hmmm, that is true...”

During the winter, I took extra good care of my health, and the rate at which my fevers spiked went down. I only got five of them!

Ah, that’s not a lot, you know? That’s way lower than it once was. My family even kept admiring how much healthier I was, saying “whoa, amazing” and so on.

Since my fevers didn’t come very often, I was able to keep a lot more food down. As a result, naturally, my nutritional intake was way better, and I’ve even grown a bit! Most likely, my physical strength has increased as well.

“If I can’t make it for some reason, I can rest at the gates with you! Well? Well?”

“Hmmmmm,” he says, thinking things over.

He didn’t dismiss the notion immediately, so I think I might actually have a chance with him, unlike Tory. I cling to him desperately, trying to get his approval.

“Once I get used to it, I’ll make it through! There’s three-year-olds that go to the forest, right? So it’s not impossible that I could do it!”

“Ahh, well... sure, there are, but they’re the kinds of kids that get into trouble when they’re left alone at home, so they have to get brought along.” “...So, if I get in trouble, I’ll get to go?” “No need to do that,” he scolds. “Don’t be stupid.”

If I can’t somehow secure my father’s permission, then when springtime comes around and my mother goes back to work, I’m going to be left once again in the care of old lady Gerda. That would be very hard on my mental

state. Absolutely no way. I don't want to have to look after all the other children left with her.

"Daddy, are you worried about me because I'm not very strong? How can I make you think that it's okay if I go out to the forest?"

"Hmmm, let me think..."

My father closes his eyes, deep in thought. I wait breathlessly for his reply.

"...For now, just come with me to the gate."

"Only to the gate? How long is 'for now'?" "Until you can walk all the way to the gate without help. Once you can walk without slowing everyone down, you'll be okay to head into the forest."

As I expected, it isn't quite so easy to get permission to go out to the forest. It feels like the clay tablets I've staked my ambitions on are getting further and further away. Working to build my strength by walking to and from my father's workplace at the gate is probably the biggest compromise the completely unreliable me can squeeze out.

Tch, I really wanted to go, too. My tablets...

I can't go to the forest, but at the very least this plan means that I don't have to stay with old lady Gerda. This is an acceptable compromise.

"...Okay. I'll do what you said!" I say, nodding once in agreement.

My father suddenly looks relieved, all the tension draining from his face. Did he really think I wasn't going to agree, and that I'd start running amok?

"Hey, Daddy. When you said you wanted me to walk to the gate, do you mean just going back and forth?"

"Nah, I'll have Otto teach you some more of the alphabet," he says. "Eh?! ...Really?"

I thought that my father burned with seething jealousy over how Otto was teaching me how to write. I wonder what caused this sudden transformation? I tilt my head to the side doubtfully, and my dad's

eyebrows furrow a little bit.

“Maine, you’re pretty weak, but Otto says you’re very smart. He says that you’d be very suited to a job that required you to use your brain, when it comes time to find you one, so if you learn your letters now, you can find a job that’s a little easier on your body.”

Otto convinced my muscle-brained, excessively doting father of that? He really is wonderful. I’m getting a little misty-eyed. I did not at all expect that I’d get official fatherly approval for Otto to teach me how to write.

“You’re good with your hands, so I was thinking that you could find a job using those, but there’s a lot more money, and a lot less strain on your body, in jobs that require thinking.”

“Jobs that require thinking? Like what?”

It never actually occurred to me that there might be jobs in this world that relied on brainpower. It seems that there are jobs where the labor is mental, not physical, huh?

“Let me see... You could work as an amanuensis, copying out official documents for government officials and aristocrats. I heard that if you do that, you can bring your work home with you if you get sick.”

Being paid to write out documents sounds kind of like a notary public, huh. If it’s like that, and I had the right qualifications, then I probably could bring work home if I needed to. I’m not really sure, though, because I don’t have any qualifications.

“Otto is a soldier now, but he was originally a trader, and he still has ties with the commerce guild. The kinds of jobs that your mother and I could refer you to wouldn’t really suit you, I don’t think, so you should be grateful for Otto’s connections.”

...My jealous, immature father is suddenly looking like a fine example of parenthood!

“Thanks, Daddy. I’ll try my hardest!”

He pats me lightly on the head, then turns to Tory.

“Tory, will you help out?”

“...She can't do it,” she says, shaking her head.

Tory is refusing to listen to a single word of her little sister's wish to come along to the forest. She shakes her head vigorously, all the way back and forth. Not trying to dismiss her concerns, my father nods slowly in comprehension.

“I understand, but, Maine's going to be in trouble if she never gets strong enough to go to the forest.”

“I guess so, but... she'll get in the way...” “That's right. Right now, she'll just be a hindrance.”

Both Tory and my father quite plainly said I am a hindrance. I already know that myself, but hearing them affirm it right in front of me like is still a blow to my pride.

“If she can at least get to the point where she can keep up with you, then even if she can't go all the way to the forest, she'll come with you as far as the gate. Until she can make it to the gate herself, I'll be the one to go with her, but when she's ready I hope you'll cooperate too.”

“...Okay, I'll try.”

Tory, the burden of responsibility weighing down on her, nods her head in agreement. My shoulders, however, still slump. It seems that my family's estimation of my strength is still the lowest it could possibly be.

I see... they still don't think I'll be able to walk all the way to the gate, even though I've been going all the way up and down those stairs to get to the water well lately without being out of breath at all...

The next day, as the sun climbs high in the sky, my father and I set out for the gates. I only follow along with him when he has the day shift. Guard duty operates on a three-shift system. The morning shift lasts from when the gates are opened in the morning, until about noon, the day shift then goes until the gates are closed in the evening, and the night watch guards the gates from when they are closed in the evening until when they are opened once again the next morning.

Until I can walk all the way to the gates by myself, I accompany my father to the gates on his day shift, then I either go back with Tory if I'm feeling up for it at the time or I wait for my father to finish his duties and go home with him.

"Make sure Maine doesn't overdo it," says my mother to my father. "Keep a close eye on her!"

"Ahhh, of course," he replies. "Let's go, Maine!" "Bye, Mom!"

Waving goodbye to my worried mother, I grab my father's hand and head off for the gates. Making it all the way down the stairs doesn't give me much trouble anymore, but by the time we make it out to the main street, I'm starting to feel a little out of breath. Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever walked out this far on my own. I'm usually being carried on someone's back, riding in a wagon, or riding piggyback on someone's shoulders by this point.

"How are you holding up, Maine?"

"I'm... still... fine...!"

If I give up here, they'll never let me go to the forest. My unrelenting obsession forces me to say I'm fine, but my physical condition is anything but fine right now. My body is heavy, and I'd like nothing more than to just sit down right here.

"You're not fine at all! ...Up we go!"

Of his own accord, my father stops walking, turns around, and picks me up. I cling desperately to him, my breath rough and ragged as I suck in air.

Impossible! This will kill me! My family's absolutely correct. There's no way I can make it to the forest.

My father winds up carrying me in his arms for over half of the trip to the gate. When we arrive, he carries me into the night duty room so that I can rest. In all honesty, I don't think I can do anything that isn't taking a break. I am absolutely dead tired, so when my father lays me down on one of the benches inside, I lay there for quite some time. After noontime has come and gone, I finally am able to sit myself upright.

“Hey, Daddy. You said Otto’s going to be teaching me how to write, but that takes a lot of time, right? Is that okay? What about his other work?”

I’m pretty sure Otto has gatekeeping duties, and I’m pretty sure that teaching me the alphabet is not one of the usual duties of a soldier.

“Otto’s job actually is teaching people how to write. We have new recruits coming in.”

“New recruits?” “After the springtime baptism, we get about five new apprentice soldiers. It’s Otto’s job to teach them how to read and write.”

It’s a good thing for a soldier to be able to read and write. If you can’t write down the names and titles of the people who pass through the gate, then you can’t be a gatekeeper.

“Am I going to be learning with them?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. But, you’re not there as a new recruit, you’re there because you’re Otto’s assistant.” “Assistant?”

Can a kid like me really be an assistant like that? This might just be me talking, but I look like I’m three years old. I don’t think anyone would believe for a second that I really was Otto’s assistant.

“Maine, you helped Otto with his work before, right?”

“Yeah, with the financial reports and the budget... but those were just calculations.”

I only helped Otto out that one time. Since he looked so ashamed to have asked me for that favor, I felt like I shouldn’t tell anyone about it, not even my father. Otto, however, seems to have told him, even though that might have gotten him in trouble.

“Ahh... I might have put too big of a burden on Otto when I asked him to do all of that work, all by himself, with nobody to help him. He suggested that you might be interested in helping him, in exchange for learning how to read and write.”

Although I’d decided that being taught the alphabet was my reward, I actually wasn’t joking when I said I wanted to be Otto’s assistant.

“You’re going to basically be Otto’s personal assistant, but it’s not allowed for kids who haven’t been baptized yet to have a job. So, we’re going to say that he’s really teaching you how to write, which is why you’re coming to see him at the gates. Your salary will be in slate pencils, and you’ll have time off whenever you’re not feeling well. Otto wanted to emphasize that this isn’t easy work, you’ll be helping him with budgets and more.”

Apparently, Otto specifically asked for me so that I can learn how to write and help him out with the paperwork. Is he thinking ahead to next year’s budget season? On top of that, by going through his superiors, he was able to get my slate pencil salary officially approved from the budget instead of having to pay me out-of-pocket. As expected of a merchant! It feels like he’s working to maximize his own profits.

“Maine,” calls Otto, “We’re about to start, are you ready?”

“Yes!”

I grab my tote bag and head from the night room to the training room. In one corner, a wooden table and chairs have been set up. Five boys sit there, probably the apprentice soldiers my father was talking about.

“This is Maine, the squad leader’s daughter. She helps out with some of the paperwork here. She wants to learn how to write, so she’ll be joining us today. Don’t make a big deal out of this.”

After giving me that kind of introduction, Otto begins his lessons. He writes out what appears to be the fundamental letters of the alphabet. Well, I haven’t memorized all of these, so it can’t be helped that this is the first step.

“These are all of the letters of the alphabet.”

Today, we’re practicing five out of the thirty-five letters of the alphabet, writing them out on our slates while repeating their pronunciations. Since I was already taught a little bit about some of these letters, memorizing these takes little effort at all.

“...Maine, you really do learn things quickly,” says Otto. “I really like

doing things like this, more than I like doing things physically,” I reply.

Unlike the ordinary children of this world, I am already very much accustomed to studying. I also have no problem at all with studying on my own, and my memory is very good. Basically, this is something that I both like and am very good at. Placing me next to these rank beginners, clumsily sweeping their poorly-gripped pencils in amateurish strokes, makes them look even more pitiful by comparison.

“Mister Otto,” I say, “I think we should move on to the next thing soon.”

“Eh? Already?”

It feels like it’s only been about thirty minutes, but it looks like the boys think that sitting still and practicing writing is torturous. They’ve started fidgeting in their seats, proof that they’ve already had enough.

“It’s hard for someone who’s just picked up a slate for the first time to focus on one thing for so long. We’ve practiced writing, now we should do some math, then draw maps of the area around the town, then learn the things soldiers need to know. We should take breaks every once in a while to move around. If we experience a little bit of a lot of different things during the day, we’ll master them a lot better.”

It’s probably best to think of these children as elementary schoolers. In Japan, we’d never sit down an elementary school student and force them to write hiragana over and over for an entire day. They wouldn’t be able to handle it, and the boys of this world, who aren’t accustomed to sitting still at all, would fare far worse.

“Let’s work on calculations next,” I say. “How about we start with counting?”

Since everyone’s been shopping before, they all know how to count up to about ten. However, there’s a few kids that don’t quite seem to get it, so we spend some time writing out the numerals from zero to five while reading them aloud. Again, the boys all start to fidget in their chairs after a while, so I wrap up the lesson and send them away to work on their physical fitness.

“Let’s wrap up studying for today. Make sure you memorize the letters and numbers we learn today by next time. If any of you don’t have them down, you’re going to spend a lot more studying in here, alone, until you get it right. It’s very important that you learn these!”

The children spread out through the room. I’m no longer needed in the training room, so Otto leads me back into the night duty room. He frowns at me, disapprovingly.

“Maine, you’re being too soft,” he says. “They’ll never learn that way.”

“Nuh-uh. If we know that learning is hard for them, and that it’ll take extra time, then it’s okay if we only teach them that much at once. Don’t compare them all to me!” “Ah... right...”

Otto scratches at his face, his stubble crackling under his fingertips. It seems like he’s realized that he might have been subconsciously comparing the other children to me.

“On top of that, if we go over it next time and they haven’t memorized it, they won’t get to go home until they do, right? So now it’s a matter of personal duty. That’s not soft at all, you know?”

“I see! That’s actually pretty strict towards these kids that have just barely started to work.”

A grim smile crosses Otto’s face. I smile back at him, and breathe a soft sigh.

I never asked about helping out with teaching the new recruits as well, but if kids like that are my classmates, my own studies will get nowhere.

Otto comes back into the night duty room, then spends the remaining time with me doing private tutoring. He teaches me how to write certain vocabulary words, then I practice them. While I’m busy, he works on his paperwork.

“Well, Maine, it looks like you’ve got the alphabet memorized, so let’s get you started on some vocabulary. I’ll teach you some of the most common words.”

“Okay!”

Mr. Otto does in fact teach me vocabulary words, but a lot of the words he’s teaching me have to do with equipment or gatekeeping duties. It really does look like he has his sights set on making me help him write up official documents. If he can make me more useful, then he’s probably going to draft me into helping out with all of the paperwork come next year’s budget season.

Some of the first words he taught me were “character reference”, “nobleman”, “letter of introduction”, and “petition”, you know? How are these “the most common words”? At the very least, if we started by learning the names of goods, I could learn words like “hay” or “foodstuffs”, and the names of kinds of weapons and armor...

My pencil clacks against the slate as I continue to spell out words. Suddenly, my father’s voice cuts through the room, telling me that it’s almost time for the gates to close and that Tory and her friends have just returned from the forest. I put my slate back in my tote bag and run outside to meet everyone.

“Tory!” I call, waving. “Let’s head home, Maine.”

There are a few other children with Tory. They all have bags and boxes strapped to their backs, packed full of their tools and the things that they’ve gathered. A couple of them give me strange looks, eyeing my single tote bag suspiciously.

“Eh? ‘Maine’?” says one of them. “Is that Tory’s little sister? I’ve never seen her before.”

I hide behind Tory, shielding myself from the impolite stares of these filthy children.

“Maine doesn’t come outside very much,” says Tory, chuckling wryly, “so it’s only natural you wouldn’t have met her.”

It seems like the fact that I never show my face at any of the big local events is causing these kids to treat me like they just saw a rare monster spawn. Tory tries to reassure me that they’re just curious and not trying to

tease me, but their stares still hurt.

“Maine, you’re going back with us?” asks a familiar voice. “Lutz!!”

Inwardly, I breathe a huge sigh of relief, seeing Lutz’s familiar face in the group. I look around, trying to find Ralph, but there’s no sign of his red hair and strong build anywhere.

“Huh? Is Ralph not with you today? Is he okay?”

“Ralph turned seven this spring, so he’s working today.” “Ahhh...”

Ralph was only seven? That’s what Maine’s memories seemed to say, but since he was so strong and so caring, I thought he had to actually be at least eight or nine. Huh? Is it just me, or did Lutz grow a bunch over the winter? It looks like this world still obeys the laws of heredity.

As I’ve been carefully considering these matters, we’ve started walking. These kids have been out in the forest all day and want to get home as quickly as possible to get their heavy packs off of their backs, so they’re walking at a pretty decent pace. Tory and Lutz notice that I’m in danger of getting left behind, and call out to the group to slow down for me.

“Hey, everyone, don’t rush!”

“You doing okay, Maine?”

I was planning on powering through and keeping up with them, but no matter how hard I tried the group started steadily pulling ahead. Children are merciless. There’s no way they were going to wait up for me.

“Everyone, you’re going too fast...” says Lutz. “Sorry, Lutz,” says Tory. “Do you mind slowing down for Maine? I have to keep an eye on all of the kids.”

Tory is the oldest of this group of unbaptized children, so she needs to look out for everyone in the group, not just her little sister.

“Got it,” says Lutz. “Maine, take your time. I’ve got a lot of things I’m carrying today, so I won’t be able to carry you too if you get tired halfway through.”

“Okay,” I reply.

I may have been left behind, but Lutz falls back to walk with me on my way home. I don't want to get tired and burden Lutz any further, so I slow down to conserve my energy.

"What were you at the gate for, Maine?" he asks. "I was studying the alphabet," I reply. "The alphabet? You can write?!"

Lutz is extremely shocked by this revelation. His eyes gleam with respect as he turns to look at me, but it only makes me feel uncomfortable. I wouldn't really describe myself as being able to write, since I only really know a few specific words.

"I can't really write anything but my name very well. I'm still practicing."

"Whoa, Maine! You can write your name?!"

Huh? Did that somehow make him respect me more?

I never would have thought that just being able to write your name would be so impressive. Although, now that I'm actually thinking about it, if the village elder is the only person in an entire village of peasants who can read and write, then it really is comparatively amazing that my father can write down other people's names.

I consider that first-grade level skill, but in this world, it's really worthy of respect...

I suddenly realize how precious being able to help out with paperwork is. It did seem like Otto was more interested in my upbringing than the other soldiers. If I decided that it was good enough for me to just be able to write other people's names, there's no way he'd be able to teach me how to write up official documents.

"Hahh..... hahh....."

"Maine, you okay?"

In my case, learning how to write is the easy part. Building up my strength is what's painful. Lutz helps me along the entire rest of the way, but by the time I make it back home, I'm so exhausted that I can't even speak.

As expected, I'm immediately stricken with another fever, lasting two whole days.

"That's why I said not to push yourself too hard!" huffs my mother, but I seem to have actually gotten a little stronger. Ordinarily, I'd be out of action for five days, but this time I was actually ready to head back out on the third day.

After a while, I settled into a routine. I'd walk with my dad towards the gate, although I got tired about halfway through, requiring him to carry me the rest of the way. I spent the day practicing how to write and helping Otto with calculations. When the children came back from the forest, I went along with them, but would immediately lose my breath and fall behind, causing Lutz to hang back with me, worried. Then, after I got home, then I'd be out for another few days.

This lasted for over a month, but then I definitely started to get stronger. I started with one day of going out and three days of rest, but then I got it down to two days, and then I started only resting every other day. At that point, I was still going very slowly, but I was somehow managing to make it all the way to the gate on my own. After that, I started going two, even three days in a row, still only taking a day off in between.

When I first made it to the gates five days in a row, my family was thrilled.

"You did it, Maine! That's the first time you've made it all the way without a break," said Tory. "You've really gotten stronger. I'm so proud of you!" said my father. "You should be about ready to head to the forest," said my mother.

Right after my family finally praised me, I was immediately hit with another fever, taking me out for another two whole days. It seems like things didn't work quite as well as I planned.

Three months after I started going back and forth between the gates, I'm finally given permission to head into the forest. Here and there, I can see glimpses of summertime. It seems that spring is at its end.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It's the first set of characters taught to students.

Chapter 17: Three Cheers for Mesopotamia!

As I brandish the shovel, which absolutely looks like it is going to break immediately, my father grabs me firmly by the shoulder. He turns me around to face him, and starts giving me the same lecture that he's been constantly giving ever since we decided that I could go to the forest.

"Maine. All you're doing today is going to the forest, then coming back. Everyone's going to have a lot of things to carry on their way back, and they're going to be tired. I want you to rest up while you're out there so that you'll have enough energy to make it back with them by yourself. Understand?"

"I got it!"

My father's face grows very serious for a moment, although I can't tell if it's just because of my answer itself or because any of my frustrations at being told this countless times might be starting to spill over. He turns to Tory.

"Tory," he says, "this might be tough, so I'm counting on you. Please talk with Lutz to make sure he knows that Maine is going to have to make it back before the gates close."

"Okay. Today we'll make sure to leave early," she replies.

Tory already has an overflowing sense of responsibility, but when she hears my father's request, her sense of duty burns brightly as well. Today, she seems a little more strict than usual.

By the time we head outside, there are already other children gathered near the well, boxes and baskets strapped to their backs as well. There's a total of eight of us, ranging from the young kids like me who haven't really started growing up to the older kids like Tory and Fey, who are a little bit bigger and stronger. Fey leads the way with his pink hair while Tory brings up the rear. As for me, I'll start at the front with Fey, but by the time we reach our destination I'll have fallen more or less to the rear.

“Alright, Maine. Let’s go! Don’t slow down, okay?”

I may be used to walking to the gates by now, but this is my first time going all the way to the forest. Thus, Lutz will be setting the pace for me. Over the last three months while walking between the gates and my home, Lutz has been gradually been figuring out what the upper bounds of my walking speed are. It’s thanks to him that we’ll be going at a speed that’s only as fast as I can comfortably go.

“Thanks, Lutz,” I say. “No, thank you, Maine, you’ve been a big help too,” he replies.

The other day, we had to finish off the last of the leftover squeezed paru. It seems that paru, which can apparently only be harvested during the winter, go bad very quickly once the weather starts to warm up. So, in thanks for everything they’ve done for me so far, I modified the recipe for bean curd hamburgers and taught them how to make paruburgers.

I made a sauce by boiling down a kind of fruit called a “pomay”. It looks at a glance like a yellow bell pepper, but it has a very tomato-like consistency and flavor on the inside. To finish the dish off, I melted cheese on top of it. The gentle sweetness of the paru added an unexpectedly deep flavor to the dish. I was a little shocked myself, and I made it!

Incidentally, Lutz literally started crying earlier, and his older brothers followed suit. They seem to have been deeply moved by the fact that I managed to double the amount of delicious food that they were able to eat during the winter. Carla, their mother, thanked me from the bottom of her heart for how easy my style of cooking is on their family’s finances. Having to feed four kids must be extremely rough. Engel’s law is absolutely murderous when you’re at the low end of the scale, huh?

“Maine, why couldn’t you have told us about paruburgers during the winter?!” Lutz complains. “Well, if you want to mince beef, it has to be very fresh, you know? Also, mincing meat is really difficult, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to convince everyone to help me...”

“Ahhh, yeah, it’s tough, but we would have done it for the sake of your cooking!”

I completely lack the strength required to work a knife for long enough to actually mince meat, and there was no way my mother would have agreed to doing something so difficult, so until now I haven't been able to eat anything like a hamburger. I'm very glad that Lutz and his family were able to help me, and I consider myself very lucky to have been able to enjoy paruburgers with them.

We keep a steady pace towards the forest, chatting about cooking along the way. Talking as we walk made the long journey actually kind of enjoyable, but as soon as we hit the forest all of the fatigue catches up to me at once, crashing over me like a wave. While everyone goes off to start foraging, I sit myself down on a sizable rock and try to recover as much of my stamina as I can. As I sit on my rock, hunched over and sucking in short, ragged breaths, Lutz comes over, obviously concerned.

He pats me on my back. "Maine, you're going to need to get used to coming out here. Otherwise, it'll be a big problem once Fey and Tory have their baptisms."

"...Why's ...that?" I gasp.

I certainly am aware that Tory is about to get baptized. After all, she has new clothes for the occasion, and I helped make her some hairpins. I'm not, however, very clear on what all happens after the ceremony.

"After she gets baptized, she's going to start her apprenticeship, right? So that means that you're going to have to come out here alone for half the week."

My eyes go wide as Lutz explains the situation. When Tory starts her apprenticeship, then I'm going to have far less help from her when it comes to a lot of the things I do every day.

"Wh... what do I do? I hadn't really considered this..."

Maine may be weak, but her life has been quite pleasant thanks to the fact that Tory is such a dependable older sister. If Maine needed anything, she could always bother Tory for it. Without Tory there, though, I don't think I'll be able to live. The blood drains from my face as I quietly sit there and panic. Lutz, however, chuckles, scratching at his nose.

“Heh heh, well, when Tory’s gone, I can help you out instead. You’re still so weak!”

“Thanks, Lutz. I’m really glad for your help.” “Ah... well, I’ve got to go looking for firewood, so you should just stay here and rest up.” He adjusts his backpack, then turns to walk away. “If you can’t make it back to the city, we’ll be in big trouble, you know!”

Lutz wanders off, heading deeper into the forest. After his footsteps have faded into the distance, I look around my surroundings to make sure that there’s nobody around, then drop to the ground, pull out my makeshift shovel, and get ready start my excavations.

Today, my goal was to make it all the way to the forest and back without getting sick. However!! I’ve made it all the way out here, to the forest, at long last! Is it even possible for me to just go home without even trying to challenge this obstacle? Absolutely not! Dig! Dig! Dig until you can’t dig any more!

I’m hoping to find some clay-like soil, but how far down am I going to have to dig to find it? Assuming the soil composition here is like it is back on Earth, I should be able to find some if I dig a fair ways down.

“Hi-YAH!”

With all of my power, I thrust my shovel deep into the soil. Unfortunately, this vaguely shovel-shaped piece of wood only manages to get about a centimeter in.

This is solid! Uh... can I even really dig here?

This feels like I’m trying to dig up the packed dirt beneath a well-used sports field. I had this image in my mind of a forest’s soil being a lot more moist and loose than this. I feel a little betrayed.

Is it the really soil that’s too hard, though, or is it that this shovel is terrible? ...Yeah, I’m betting it’s the shovel.

There is a world of difference between my concept of what a shovel should look like and this thing. I wanted something made out of metal, at least, not wood! Regardless, though, it doesn’t matter if the shovel’s made

of wood, or if the ground is too hard or too soft, abandoning this is just not an option. Even if progress is going to be slow, what choice do I have but to continue digging?

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping...

My wooden shovel slowly peels away the topmost layers of dirt. Unearthing my clay is going to take a lot of time, patience, and strength, and it really doesn't look like I'm going to be able to get it done in just one day. It looks like making clay tablets is going to be some serious work. I can only pray that it will be easier than my attempt to make pseudo-papyrus.

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping...

By the time I've gotten maybe five centimeters deep, I hear someone's footsteps approach from behind me.

"What the heck are you doing, Maine?" says Lutz as he approaches, both hands full of sticks and branches. His eyes go wide as he sees me sitting on the ground, digging with my shovel. "You promised that you were going to stay put and rest if we took you with us to the forest, right?!"

I certainly did promise that when we were leaving, but there was no way I could just sit tight when my target was finally right in front of me. I was planning on stopping before Lutz returned, but once I got started, I just couldn't quit.

...W, what do I do?

I was able to fool my father with a smile and a hug, but Lutz and Tory have specifically been appointed my guardians. I won't be able to trick them that easily. I know from experience that if I try, that would only make me look more suspicious, and they'd end up asking me even more direct questions.

"Uh, ummm... you see, Lutz," I stammer. "...I see what?"

Lutz furrows his brow, puts his hands on his hips, and looks down at me sternly. My interrogation has begun. Well then. If I tell him the truth, he's going to get mad at me for not thinking things through, and if I lie, then

he's going to see through it and get mad at me for lying to him. Which of these options is the least damaging?

"I'm pretty sure that I told you that you need to be resting, so what the heck were you doing?" he demands. "...Um, ummm! I was digging a hole!!"

The truth spills out of my mouth as my will crumbles under Lutz's imposing aura.

I'm actually pretty scared of him getting angry at me. I'm pretty dependent on him right now. If he storms off, I won't make it back home before the gates close.

"Yeah, I can see that. What are you digging for?"

Even though I'd answered honestly, Lutz seems twice as angry now. He glares at me from above, his eyes cold as ice.

"Well, um, you see... I want some 'clay'."

"Huh? You want some what?"

Lutz cocks his head to one side, unable to understand what I'm getting at. His expression grows slightly more dubious, and seemingly slightly less angry.

"I want soil that's really dense and solid, the kind where water doesn't drain away."

"...If you wanted that, wouldn't there be a lot more of that over there, where there's not a lot of trees and grass?"

If soil has bad drainage, then it's difficult for plants to grow there. I guess it would be much more efficient to look for a place with fewer plants.

"Thanks, Lutz!" I say, immediately standing up to leave. "Hey! Maine, wait!"

Lutz reaches out and grabs me by the scruff of my neck before I can run away. He's got both size and strength over me, so there's no way I can escape.

“Let me go, Lutz.”

“Your job today is to rest, Maine. Haven’t you been listening?” he says, pulling on my ears. “This isn’t something you need to run out and get literally right now, right?” “Ow, ow, ow!” Flustered, I flail my arms ineffectively as I cry out. “I don’t need it to live! I just really want it, so I wasn’t going to bother anyone to help me get it!”

Lutz lets go of my ears, and I immediately clap my hands over them, glaring up at him with teary eyes. He falters, just a little bit, although I don’t know if it’s because he can’t come up with a good rebuttal or because he’s scared of the powerful love that I show towards books despite not really being materialistic otherwise. What’s important, though, is that this is an opening that my instincts are telling me that I cannot let slip past. Now is my time to strike!

“If you make me sit still here, are you going to go dig it up yourself?!”

“...I’ve actually gathered my share of the firewood for today, so I can do that. So, Maine, sit there and be good.”

I am floored by this completely unexpected reply. My jaw drops, and I can do nothing but stare blankly up at him. He should have lashed back out at me for what I just said, but... is this guy an idiot? He surely has more important things to do than helping me work on a project that he has no interest in at all. Rather than digging up clay, shouldn’t he be gathering something?

“Lutz, um, I’m happy you want to help, but don’t you have your own things to do?”

“Maine, you’re really weak, and there’s no way you’ll be able to dig that up, so I’ll do it for you. You can pay me back by telling me what it is you need it for and what you want to do.” “...Why, though?” “Well, if I know what you want to do with it, then I can help you avoid doing something useless. Just now, even though you knew exactly what you wanted, you were digging in the wrong place, you know?”

Ouch, right in my weak spot.

Even though I certainly know what it is I'm after, I don't know the words for it in this language, I don't know what things might look like here that are different in Japan, and I don't have the tools that I need. There are a lot of places where I can go wrong. After that explanation, I definitely understand now how useful it would be to have Lutz's help in this project, but I still don't actually know what his motivation is.

"Why do you want to help me like this?"

"Hm? You made me parucakes when I was super, super hungry that one time, right? I decided right then that I needed to help you out in the future."

Huh? Just like that? That's all it took to get him to dig up some clay for me? Wow, I shouldn't underestimate the power of tasty food.

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what's going on in Lutz's head that makes him equate pancakes to heavy labor, but as far as I'm concerned, he's a lifesaver. Lutz offered to help of his own volition and without any reservations, so of course I'll accept. It's fantastic that I have someone to entrust the heavy lifting to.

"...Okay, I'll leave it to you," I say. "I'll wait here."

"Okay! I just need to finish this up real quick."

In a flash, he gathers up his firewood and stows it away. Real quick, indeed. Then, he leads me over to where he thinks that the drainage in the soil is poor, at a somewhat low, sloping spot in the forest floor.

"Should be around here," he says, pulling out the shovel I had brought with me. He shoves the wooden, spatula-like implement into the earth and begins to dig.

"Maine, you brought this shovel all the way out here. This digging thing isn't just some impulse, is it. Were you even intending to keep your promise?"

"Um!? W... well, uh... ummm, I finally was able to come out here, and I just couldn't wait any longer. So I guess I did plan this..."

His face twitching, Lutz stabs the shovel deep into the ground with all his might in a sudden outburst of emotion.

“Craaap, I wasn’t paying enough attention. You looked like you were going to be good!”

“Yeah, but... my daddy was paying even less attention.” “Your dad’s way too soft on you!”

Lutz, fueled by his anger, tears up the earth, despite the fact that he’s using the wooden shovel I was barely able to make any progress with. Unlike the slow, steady scraping that I was doing, Lutz pounds away at the ground, gouging out chunks of the earth with every strike. This is a marvel to watch.

Is this just the strength difference? Or is it the way he’s doing it? Is there a knack to it?

“Huh? The color of the dirt is different down here?”

Lutz has excavated about fifteen centimeters down to a layer where the earth is a different color.

“Is this what you want, Maine?” he asks, holding up a small chunk of earth, which I take from him.

It’s cool to the touch, dense, and sticky, and it changes shape as I try to mold it with my fingers. There’s no mistake, this is exactly the kind of clay I was searching for.

“Yeah, this is it! Wow, Lutz, you’re so strong! This would have taken me forever to do.”

“I’m definitely not as weak as you, at least,” he says, as he continues to dig out more clay.

My eyes glitter with excitement as I start ferrying the growing pile of clay, bit by bit, over to a nearby rock. How many tablets am I going to be able to make with this, I wonder? I’m still only just thinking ahead, but I’m already starting to fall in love with these lumps of clay.

“So, what are you going to do with this?” he asks. “Eheheh~, I’m going to

make some 'clay tablets'."

"'Clehtab-luts'?" "Yeah!"

I squeeze and stretch the clay, Lutz's effort given form, into the shape of a thin clay board. When I've finished stretching into shape, I pick up a thin stick from the ground, then start to write out the fairy tales that my mother back in Japan used to tell me.

I really want to be writing this in the local language if I could, but the things Otto's been teaching me are all the high-level vocabulary that are needed for work. I can probably write out boilerplate text for a nobleman's title or letter of introduction by now, but I still don't know any words that are actually useful in ordinary circumstances. For now, I'll stick to writing in Japanese.

"Maine, are those words you're writing?"

"Yeah, they are. If I record everything in a document like this, then if I forget something in the future I can read this to remember it. Documents are amazing, you know! If I write out enough of these like this, I can then collect them into a book, which is even more amazing." "Ahh....." "Lutz, thank you so much for getting me this clay! If there's something else you need to go gather, then you can go do that, okay? I'll just stay here and write." "Got it."

The story that I'm writing right now feels like it should be titled "The Shoemaker and the Elves, Alternate Universe Edition". I try to squeeze as many characters onto each slab as I can, but in the end it takes me nearly ten tablets to finish the story.

"Alright, I did it!"

At the bottom of the page, I scribe the character for "the end", visibly trembling with excitement. I spin around, throwing my hands in the air in glee.

Clay tablets are amazing! Clay tablets are doable! Three cheers for the great ancient civilization of Mesopotamia!

Once I get these home, I can fire them in the stove. If they don't crack

and fall apart, then they truly will be complete. I clench my writing stick tightly in my fist, then turn around to gaze upon my spread of tablets.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

In the next instant, my hands are clasped to the sides of my face, mouth gaping wide open, looking very much like that *The Scream*2. All of the blood drains from my face as I take in the almost unbelievable situation I see before me.

“What’s wrong, Maine?” asks Fey, standing in front of me. “Y... you stepped on them! They’re all... squished!! W... waaaaaah!!”

The first half, the entire first half, of the story that I had so carefully and painstakingly written out, has been squashed completely out of shape by the bootprints of Fey and his friends. They’re unrecognizable as tablets anymore, and of course the writing on them is completely illegible.

“I... I just finished that... after so much work... this!” I hiccup, barely choking back my tears. “Don’t you know how much effort I’ve put in to finally make it out here?! I put so! much! time! into trying to make this absurdly frail body strong enough to do this, pushed myself through all sorts of pain, and I really thought... Aaah, I even dragged Lutz and Tory into this too, and still! I finally finished this, I finally got it done, and then what?! Is there anything in that skull of yours? Is your hair pink because your brain is stuffed full of flowers?! Idiot! Idiot idiot idiot! Waaaaaaaah!!”

I break down crying in such a ridiculous emotional display that I, who is supposed to have the mental stability of an adult, should be ashamed of. I can’t stop sobbing, I can’t stop my tears from falling. If you put my supposed emotional maturity aside, though, this is exactly what a very distressed little girl should look like.

Having heard me scream, Tory rushes over with wide, worried eyes. She quickly asks around to figure what the current situation is, then crouches down next to me, wrapping a comforting arm around me.

“Maine, there’s no need to cry like that. They didn’t mean to hurt you, you know?”

It doesn't matter if they had ill intentions or not, that's not going to change the fact that my tablets have been smashed into pulp. No matter what Tory says, there's no way it can abate my resentment, my rage, over seeing the finished product that I had finally achieved smashed right in front of me.

"No! I'll never forgive them!"

Tears and snot stream down my face, but I lift my head to give a terrified Fey my most threatening glare. Lutz gently pats me on the back.

"You can make them again, right?" he says. "I'll help, and these guys want to make up for this so they'll help too, right?"

"Ah, yeah!" exclaims Fey. "We'll help. I'm really sorry."

Fey and his friends nod vigorously, not disagreeing with Lutz at all.

"...Okay," I say. "I'll make it again."

I was able to make these tablets once, so I'm sure that I'm on the right path. Clay tablets are far easier to make than papyrus, and I'm satisfied with the final result.

However, I make very sure to leave them with a warning.

"There will not be a second time."

If these kids are keeping a list of people not to piss off, I'm pretty sure I just jumped to the top of it.

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Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It's the first set of characters taught to students.
2. The Edvard Munch painting.

Chapter 18: Interlude - Is my daughter a potential criminal?!

My name is Gunther. I'm the lucky husband of my beautiful wife Eva and the proud father of my two adorable daughters, Tory and Maine.

Maine's the kind of girl who gets sick the instant she works herself even a little bit too hard, but after one particularly bad fever she's started to work on pushing that limit back, bit by bit. She's been saying and doing some strange things, but lately she's been putting a lot of effort into trying to make herself stronger. She used to need to stop and catch her breath after only just going downstairs to leave our building, but over the course of the last three months she's worked so hard that now she can walk all the way to the gate without taking a single break.

She's amazing, right? My daughter's a real go-getter! Don't you agree?

On top of that, she's very, very bright... I think. I can't really say for sure, honestly. It's just that, Otto has always insisted that an assistant would only drag him down whenever I've brought the idea up to him, but when Maine came along, he got very excited and immediately asked if she could be his assistant, so she must be very smart.

According to him, she's so good at math that she was able to spot calculation errors in my squad's financial report just by looking at it, and it looks like she memorized how to write all of the words in our basic statements after just a little bit of teaching. On top of all of that, she has a very logical nature. She's always looking at her surroundings, using her powers of observation to spot tiny little changes that she can make, always thinking about how to further her goals. It seems that Otto is convinced she's absolutely exceptional.

What the hell?

I didn't understand half of what Otto was telling me, but it's easy to see that my daughter is so amazingly smart that she surprised even Otto.

That's my Maine! My amazing little girl. She truly is blessed by the gods.

Today, Maine's heading off to the forest for the first time! I'm on the day shift today, so I'll be here to meet her group when she comes back. I can't help but be worried, though.

"Sir, please calm down," says Otto. "Hm? Ah, yeah."

She's gotten strong enough to walk to the gates, but is she really going to be able to make it all the way to the forest? If she struggles to make it, there, then she won't be able to rest inside a building like she can here. She'll be stuck outside. Earlier, I suddenly had the worst idea: what happens if her fever comes back while she's out there in the forest?

"Sir," says Otto again, "we need you to do your job. Please stop staring off into space."

"Oh." "Are you thinking that Maine isn't going to make it?" "Otto, you... don't say anything unnecessary!" "Then, sir, please do your job. She'll be back in the evening, right, sir?"

I'm still annoyed that Maine actually looks up to this impertinent man and calls him "teacher". Well, I know for a fact that she respects me even more. Heh heh heh. After all, when I made her some knitting needles and helped her with the pin for Tory's hair ornaments, she declared that I was the best father in the world! She was definitely not lying.

I go about my work, my subordinates steering clear of me as I restlessly wait for Tory and her group to return. Tory has an amazing sense of responsibility, and she agreed that she'd wrap it up early today, for Maine's sake. Maine is still very weak and still slower than the other kids, so it's conceivable that they'd leave the forest in the afternoon.

The afternoon. It's obvious that they won't have come back by now. I know that.

The sun is starting to dip a little bit towards the horizon, but they still haven't come back. It should be soon, right?

The trickle of people leaving the city for the day has turned into a rush. Still no sign of her?

"Sir," says Otto, "your daughter promised that they would return early, so

they're going to be back here soon, is that right? So, please, sir, please stop glaring at the travelers. You're scaring everyone."

The number of people entering the city to find an inn for the evening has grown, while the number of farmers leaving the city after finishing selling their grain has shrunk. Still, Tory and Maine haven't come back yet. They should be here any minute now.

They're so slow! You said you would bring everyone back early, Tory! Oh no, did Maine collapse on the way back?!

An image suddenly rushes into my mind. Maine, collapsed on the side of the road, unable to move. Tory, panicking, with no idea what to do. A feeling that I absolutely have to do something seizes hold of me.

"Otto, watch over things here..."

"Sir! Are you abandoning your post?! ...O, over there! Isn't that Tory over there?!" "Where!!"

Otto stands on tiptoes to see over the crowd. He's taller than I am, so he can see all the way back to the end of the line.

"She's right outside the gate, standing at the very end of the line with everyone else. Let's get move the line as quickly as possible, sir."

"Alright, they're here!"

I move quickly, processing the queue of people waiting to get into the city at lightning speed so that I can get Tory and her friends in as soon as I can. Unlike just a few moments ago, people flow smoothly through the checkpoint, and very soon I can see Tory in the crowd.

This certainly doesn't look like she was at the end of the line! Damn you, Otto! You tricked me!

However, I can't see Maine anywhere nearby. I can't believe that Tory, with her strong sense of responsibility, would just abandon her sister like that, but no matter how hard I look I can't see Maine anywhere.

"Tory, where's Maine?!"

"Lutz stayed behind, they're still on their way. They should be back right

before the gate closes, I think.”

I immediately look off into the distance, but I can’t see Maine or Lutz anywhere. If they’re only going to barely make it back in time for the gate to close, then they can’t have left the forest early at all.

“You promised you were going to come back here early, right? Is this what you call early?”

“.....” “.....”

As I scold Tory, the other kids exchange complicated expressions, as if they’re debating whether they should say something or leave it to Tory. It seems like they’ve decided to keep it to themselves.

“Tory, what happened out—” She interrupts me before I can finish the question. “A bunch of things. I’ll tell you about it later, okay? We’re late, so all our moms are going to be worried, too. I want to get everyone home as soon as possible.”

Abruptly cutting the conversation short, she starts walking off. The rest of the children follow her into the city, looking incredibly worn out.

“What could have happened out there? Hey, Otto, what do you think?”

“If it was anything serious, they would have asked for help, sir.”

He may be talking like nothing could have possibly happened, but if Tory just blows off my questions and can’t even give me a simple answer about what happened, I’m going to have questions, you know? I’m going to get worried, you know? Maine! What in the hell happened out there!

I grow more and more restless as the day drags on. Sure enough, right before we start preparing to close the gates, Lutz finally appears, Maine leaning heavily on him, face blue.

“Maine!”

“...Daddy... sorry.”

Before I can ask anything, Maine mumbles out a single word of apology, then collapses into my arms. I help Lutz get remove the wicker box (with nothing but a shovel in it) from her back, then pick her up.

“Lutz! What happened out there? Why’s she apologizing?”

“Ahh... um, probably, because she made a promise that she didn’t mean to keep, I guess? She suddenly started digging a big hole when I had my back turned, then she spent a bunch of time making ‘cley tab-luts’, then she got super mad at Fey and the others, and then got really worked up... She’s probably going to be sick for three days.”

Lutz rubs his temples in frustration as he tells me everything that happened. My eyes go wide with shock.

“And you didn’t stop her?!” I snap. He looks up at me, resentfully. “Mister, do you really think that me and Tory didn’t try?”

That’s right. No matter how much I want to pin the blame on him, there’s no way that both Tory and Lutz didn’t try to stop her. Those two have done a good job of taking care of Maine in the past. Lutz, especially, has spent the last three months helping Maine get home from the gate, and even though they’re the same age he looks after her like she’s his younger sister.

“Ah... no, sorry.”

“Don’t get mad at Tory, she really tried her best. Ah, you can probably get mad at Maine, though. I’m mad at her too. ...Well,” he says, looking at Maine as she lies limp in my arms, “not really, anymore.”

It feels like Maine’s fever is steadily starting to rise, bit by bit. Her face had been completely pale, but now it’s getting redder and redder.

“Take care of Maine, okay?” he says. “I got to catch up with Fey and go home too.”

“Yeah, will do. Thanks for keeping an eye on her for me.”

As Lutz runs off, I bring Maine into the night duty room and gently lay her down on the bench. Her face is bright red now, and her breathing comes in short, ragged gasps. This bench will have to be a good enough place to rest for now.

I finish up my work as quickly as I possibly can, then carry Maine all the

way home.

“Welcome home, Gunther,” says Eva. “Did Maine collapse again?”

From her complete lack of surprise, it seems like she expected that this was going to happen. Swiftly, she gets Maine changed out of her outdoor clothes and gets her tucked into bed. I sit down with Tory in the kitchen, hoping to hear her side of the story.

“What happened out there today, Tory?” I ask. “I heard a little about it from Lutz, but I want you to tell me about it too.”

Tory flinches in her chair, a frightened expression on her face as she hears that I already know about what happened. For someone like Tory with such a powerful sense of responsibility, being scolded for a major mistake is one of the most terrifying things out there. To put her mind at ease, I reiterate what Lutz told me.

“Lutz told me that he didn’t want me to get angry at you. I heard that you did your best out there. He also said that I should really be getting mad at Maine, so, could you tell me what happened?”

Now that I’ve told her that I’m not mad, Tory’s look of terror starts to gradually fade away. Her eyes flicker back and forth as she tries to get the words together in her head, then she slowly opens her mouth to speak.

“To be honest, I really don’t know all that much. When we made it to the forest, Maine was about as tired as she usually is, so she sat down on a rock to take a break. Me and Lutz went off to do our gathering. I wanted to finish up quickly, so I thought that I had to hurry, and...” She trails off, worry building on her face again. “It’s okay, I’m with you so far” I say. It’s easy enough for me to see what happened when they first arrived. “So I thought to myself, ‘it’s probably time to go soon’, but right when I was gathering everything up I heard Maine start screaming. I ran over there as fast as I could, and I saw Maine really, really angry, so angry that she was crying. Fey and his friends apparently destroyed something that she had finally been able to make? She was so mad that I couldn’t calm her down at all, and she kept saying things like ‘I’ll never forgive you’, and... Eventually Lutz said something about helping her make everything again,

and then she finally started calming down.”

I close my eyes, trying to piece together Tory’s messy explanation. I try to imagine what it would have looked like if I had been there with them.

...I don’t get it. Maine was making something, and Fey broke it, so then she threw a tantrum?

“What was Maine making?”

“I don’t know, exactly. I think I heard her call it a ‘cley tab-lut’, but... Everyone stopped to help her make them again, so that’s why we were so late.”

I still don’t really understand what exactly happened, but I do know one thing.

“So, what you’re saying is that Maine broke her promise to do nothing but rest once she got to the forest?”

“Huh... um... probably...”

Maine didn’t keep her promise to sit still and arbitrarily went off to make something. That thing got broken, so she got everyone else caught up in making it again, so they spent too long out there before coming back, so she collapsed, so now her fever’s back. There are limits to how much of a bother someone can be, even if they’re Maine.

“I’m not going to let her go to the forest again,” I say. “What?! No! She’ll be so mad!”

For some reason, Tory with me disagrees vigorously. It doesn’t matter if Maine gets angry, though. I’m the one who should be angry, since she made a promise to me and then broke it.

“It’s only fair. I can’t let a girl who doesn’t keep her promises go off to the forest.”

I’m going to have to be very strict with her. I can’t let her go out only with other kids if she’s going to ignore all the rules for doing so and break the promises she makes for her parents’ peace of mind. It’s too dangerous.

I stand up and start heading towards the bedroom so that I can have a

talk with Maine herself, but Tory grabs onto my arm and won't let go. She seems desperate to stop me. I feel bad for her, since she's just trying to look out for her little sister, but I absolutely have to have a talk with Maine.

"Dad, please! Think about it again!"

"My mind's made up. I won't let her go out there again! If she doesn't keep her promises, there's nothing else I can do."

Maine looks up at me as I enter the bedroom, although I don't know if she heard me. Her face is red with fever and her eyes are watery, but she still opens her mouth to speak, though it looks quite painful.

"...Daddy, just one more time. ...I'm making 'clay tablets'."

However, what came out of her mouth was not at all what I expected. She isn't apologizing, she isn't reflecting on what she has done, she's making demands! For some reason, she still wants to go to the forest and keep making something or other. For an instant, I lose my temper.

"What are you thinking?!" I roar. "Absolutely not!"

Maine gives a little sigh, then turns her head to look at Tory, standing next to me.

"...Hey, Tory. ...I'll make them at home, so..."

"G... got it! I'll bring them home with me next time."

Wait a minute, Tory. Why are you just accepting this like it's the obvious next step?! Maine, what the hell do you think you're going to be doing in my house?! Also, are you just ignoring how angry I am?!

I spin to face Tory. "You're talking about the thing that made Maine collapse? Like hell I'll let you bring that into my house!"

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Maine's eyes narrow to slits, her expression growing unbelievably cold. Like the flip of a switch, the atmosphere in the room suddenly goes icy.

A strange shimmer of color, like the surface of an oil slick, dances across the gold of her eyes, but it must just be my imagination.

“...Are you serious, Daddy?” she says, quietly, and the incredible pressure of her words sends a shiver down my spine. I take a step back, unintentionally, shocked by the raw intimidation that my own daughter is putting out.

“Ab... absolutely serious!”

“I see...”

Maine looks away, like she’s suddenly lost all interest in me.

“Well then... I’m just going to have to do to Fey what he did to my ‘tablets’, then... heh heh...”

A cruel smile spreads across her face, that strange color still shimmering in her eyes. I shiver, again. I feel like I’m drowning in this strange atmosphere, and my breath catches in my throat.

“...Maine?” I say. She starts to chuckle, a dark, terrifying sound. Tory goes completely pale, like she’s seen a monster. “Dad!” she says, shaking my arm, “just say she can go back to the forest!!”

“...Maine,” I say again, “what are you thinking about?” “Hm~mm? ...Well, I was thinking of how I was going to make it so that Fey can’t go to the forest either. ...How, indeed?... ...‘Psychological trauma’...? ...So, ‘Bancho Sarayashiki’, then...?1 ...Oh, or maybe ‘The Ring’?”

Her words are broken and nonsensical, delirious from her fever, but her head keeps moving and she keeps mumbling things out, bit by bit. I can’t really hear it very well, but it almost sounds like there’s a dark, gloomy echo underneath her words. It must be my imagination. Her voice must be a little cracked from the fever.

My little daughter can’t be this scary.

“...Why are you talking about Fey, now?” I ask. “He doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Oh, but he does,” she says, drawing in a slow, painful breath. “...But I understand what you’re saying. ...Truly, I understand.” She nods slightly, several times.

I might have gotten a little swept away in the strangeness of the moment, but if Maine understands what I was saying, then everything's okay. She's very bright, so I'm sure she understands what she did wrong.

"Ah, okay, if you're reflecting on your actions, then—"

"I will make them cry. ...Well, I'm going to sleep." "Maine, wait! You didn't understand at all! Why did you just say that?!"

If she really understood me, then where the hell did "I will make them cry" come from?! Make who cry?! Me?! I don't understand her at all! You're nearly bringing me to tears, Maine!

"You're noisy. ...Get out."

"I'm your father! Do not make me angrier than I already am!"

Tory pulls hard on my arm, dragging me back into the kitchen. I've been ejected from my own bedroom by my two daughters.

"Tory, that was Maine in there, right?"

"I think that was Angriest Maine. Her eyes were sparkling kind of weirdly. When Fey broke her 'cley tab-luts', she got so mad that she started crying, and the same thing happened. Everyone said it was really scary."

Ahh, if even I got a little bit scared after that, it must have been absolutely terrifying for those kids.

"She only started to cheer up when we were helping her fix things, so when it was time to go, I couldn't make myself say it..."

"I see."

If she was putting out that much pressure, I don't blame her. Right now, even I really just want to leave her alone.

"When it looked like we'd just barely make it back to the gates before they closed, I begged her to go. Lutz helped, and when he said we'd definitely finish it next time, we finally got her to stop working. Then everyone promised to help her finish it next time, and she said that she'd come back with us."

“.....”

I understand now what Tory was getting at when she tried to stop me just a little while ago. If she had only managed to calm Maine down by telling her that they'd finish up next time, then of course she wouldn't want me to go in there and tell her that she can never go back.

“Dad, can you let her go just one more time? I think that Fey and the others are really scared of what's going to happen if she gets mad again. Didn't she say that she was going to do to Fey what he did to her 'cley tab-luts'?”

“What happened to those, anyway?”

I still don't understand what a 'cley tab-lut' is. What the hell kind of thing is it?

“Fey and his friends stepped on them and squashed them, so what's she going to do to them? Is she going to trample them flat?! She said she was going to make sure they couldn't go to the forest again either, what did that mean? She said she was absolutely going to make them cry! What is she going to do? What is Fey going to do?!”

The blood drains from my face as I listen to Tory. Hearing everything Maine had said again is only making me more scared. I wonder, no, I need to know what Maine is planning to do. Is... is my daughter about to start committing crimes?

“Tory, what can we do to stop her?”

“I don't know. Try asking Lutz. He was the one who got her to calm down when we were in the forest.”

The next day, I pull Lutz to the side as he passes through the gates on his way to the forest and ask him what Maine could have meant. Tory was probably just scared and blew things out of proportion, it's probably not actually that big of a deal, right?

However, Lutz smashes my tiny bit of hope with a cheerful answer.

“A~ah,” he says, in a light tone of voice, “she got super mad at Fey and

the others, after all. You absolutely can't stop her when her eyes get like that, you know."

"Uh?" "If she finds even the tiniest chance, she latches onto it like a magic beast. She'll get whatever she wants to get done, done. She's the kind of girl who absolutely finishes her goals. No matter what she has to do, no matter how long it takes."

His eyes glimmer with pride and his chest is puffed up, and he talks like he's enthusing about how awesome Maine is. But, wait a bit, think about this for a second. If a person like that decided that they wanted to hurt someone, that would make them a supremely dangerous individual, right? And why is Lutz acting so proud of her? She's my daughter, you know?

"Like, say, these 'cley tab-luts'. She wanted to go to the forest, so she spent three whole months getting strong enough to get there. She said all of that was so she could make those 'cley tab-lut' things. So, I think that she's definitely the kind of person who'll never give up on what they've set their mind to."

"...Those 'cley tab-luts' were that important to her, huh..."

I had no idea that she'd put that much effort into making those things. It looks like it's not such a simple thing to just ban her from finishing them. Just when I decide that I should probably talk to her about it again, Lutz drops another bombshell.

"A~ah, you know, after she finally made her 'cley tab-luts' only to see them smashed in front of her, and then running out of time before she could finish remaking them, and then getting sick and collapsing on her way back, and then being told that she can't go back to the forest and that she can't have any clay in the house either... She's going to blame it all on Fey, for stepping on them in the first place. I really hope they come out of this alive."

"Don't say something so terrifying! Are you saying I've raised a criminal?!"

She said she was going to make them cry, not kill them. It's okay!! ...At least, that's what I want to tell myself.

“Eh? Well, maybe you really did, Mister Gunther?”

“Huh? I did?” “Well, you banned her from going to the forest and making her 'cley tab-luts', right? Me, I'm terrified of what might happen if she goes at it with all of her might. I wouldn't dare try to help or hinder her, and I'd never, ever tell her she couldn't do something.” “Terrified?”

I blink my eyes repeatedly, trying to process what he's telling me. No matter how I look at it, Maine is only six years old, though she's so little she looks like she's three or four. She's sickly, frail, short, weak, and slow. I can't help but think that Maine using all of her strength to do something isn't actually all that much of a problem. Lutz, though, shrugs his shoulders, continuing to describe why he thinks she's so scary.

“Because, you know, Maine thinks differently than I do. I don't know what she's going to do, where, or how. She might be so weak that I wouldn't take her seriously if she came at me with a weapon, but that's not something she'd ever do. I don't know how, but she'd find and attack their weak points directly, and that's really terrifying.”

I groan to myself. Lutz is being completely serious here. I hadn't really thought that what Maine meant by all of her might might have been different than what Lutz or I would mean. I'm scared that I don't even know how serious she's going to be. That lack of understanding alone is terrifying.

“A while ago, she even beat my big brother Zeke, like to the point where he was seriously begging her to stop. She told me that strength isn't everything, and lately, I've been beating my big brothers too, sometimes.”

Wait a minute! This is the first I'm hearing about this! How could she possibly beat Zeke? And we're talking about beating as in “winning”, right?! What has my daughter been doing?!

“Hey, Lutz,” I say. “This is a completely honest question: how would you stop Maine from being so angry, if you were in my shoes?”

“Hmmm, I think that I'd find a lot of clay and pile it up in front of her. She seems absolutely fixated on nothing but her 'cley tab-luts'.”

Now that Lutz has described the situation to me, I know what I have to do. In order to preserve the safety of this town and keep my youngest daughter from a life of crime, I'm going to, begrudgingly, have to let her go back to the forest.

When I tell her this, though, she looks very dissatisfied, puffing out her cheeks in frustration.

"...And I'd come up with all of these really good plaaans... and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?"

"Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you're plotting out of your head right this very instant!" "Tsk..."

It seems like she dreamed up some sort of plans to squash Fey flat while caught in her feverish nightmares. I don't know if it's because she's a little too smart, or just far too angry, but I feel like this was a very close call.

For now, I've stopped Maine from committing any crimes. Fey and the others won't have to face her wrath, and I've protected the peace of this town. I'm very, truly grateful that Lutz told me how I could calm her down.

I breathe a sigh of relief, having put everything back in order, then suddenly gasp as I come to a realization.

Huh? Didn't all this start because she needed to think twice about breaking promises?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese ghost story about broken promises.

Chapter 19: Clay Tablets - Also no good.

While wracked by feverish nightmare, I dreamed up ways to bury Fey and his lackeys in the icy grip of terror.

I was so close! I was so close to finally having a book! But, if I can't go to the forest, and if I can't have any clay brought back to me, then I'll never get my book.

It would seem that this calls for the most traumatic of ideas: classic Japanese horror. I have no solid idea about what the denizens of this world are truly afraid of, but if I let my hair hang down in front of my face like Sadako¹, wear a stained, tattered dress, and stumble towards them while whispering dark curses... or maybe I could count my missing clay tablets like Okiku from Bancho Sarayashiki...² How about that? That's scary, right?

Even though I had come up with so many good ideas, by the time my fever went down, my father had changed his mind. When I'm finally healthy enough to get out of bed, he tells me that he's lifted the ban on my going to the forest.

"...Tomorrow," he says, with a complicated expression on his face. "Hm?" I reply, looking up at him. "You can go back to the forest tomorrow."

"Huh? I can? Why?" "...You don't seem happy."

I actually really am happy that I can go back to the forest, but this means all of my Japanese horror plans are for naught. I'd been practicing mumbling curses, thinking about how to make my clothes look properly ghastly, and coming up with the perfect times and places to really set the stage for the whole spectacle. I could have stood on the edge of the well, or I could have shuffled out of a dark alleyway...

"I mean, I'm happy, but..."

"But, what?" "...And I'd come up with all of these really good plaaans... and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?" "Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you're plotting out of your head right this very instant!"

“Tsk...”

Well, if I can go to the forest and finish working on my tablets, then my plans aren't really necessary. In fact, it would ultimately be more wasteful to actually go through with them. I no longer have the free time to play around with Fey and the others, so it's obvious that those plans are just going to be automatically discarded.

Nevertheless, what on earth happened to make him change his mind so suddenly?

"I've been keeping an eye on how you're doing, and I think you can go tomorrow. But no sooner!"

It seems that he didn't want me to go because suddenly taking off for the forest while I was still convalescing would have been a terrible idea. I already knew that, though. Nobody in the world knows better than me what a pile of junk this body is.

Today, my fever went down and I was given permission to go back to the forest. My heart dances with joy as I work on preparing everything I'll need for tomorrow. In the storage room, I find some sort of board that I might be able to use as a writing desk, and put it in my basket. (What that board is supposed to be used for, I don't know.) Then, I grab the entire pile of old rags that my mother uses as cleaning cloths and stuff them in there too. I'll use those to wrap my tablets in for transport on the way home.

Clay tablets! Clay tablets clay tablets clay tablets I'm coming for yooou!!

The next day, I wake up energized and excited, only to be greeted by heavy rain. Not just any heavy rain, even, but a torrential, record-breaking downpour, a storm so fierce that it's practically a typhoon. Even though the shutters on our window are closed, I can still hear the howling of the wind and the pounding of the rain.

“Noooooooooo!! Rain?!”

In a world without weather forecasts, thinking about the weather had never even occurred to me. There's been many times where I haven't been able to go outside because my fever was too high or because my family

didn't say it was okay, but until now I was never kept indoors by bad weather.

Visions flash through my head of my tablets, pounded by the rain until they're nothing but mud. Even though I had hidden them from the elements under some bushes, that's nowhere close to being adequate protection against a typhoon like this.

Ngyaaaaah! My tablets...! They're turning to droopy mush!!

"Hey, Maine, wait!" yells my mother as I immediately, unthinkingly, dash for the door. She grabs both of my arms and holds them behind me, stopping me in place. "Where do you think you're going?!"

"The forest!" I yell, struggling against her grip. "Even on the best of days you get fevers far too quickly, so why would you think that going outside in the middle of a storm like this is a good idea?!"

The sound of the wind and the rain pounding ceaselessly at the wooden door reverberates through the house. Just from the noise, it's obvious that this is an extremely violent storm. An ordinary person would hesitate before trying to go out in this, even if it's just to the well, so there's no chance in hell that I'll be able to make it outside at all. Heartbroken, I sit down abruptly, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"My 'clay tablets'... waaah!"

"It's okay, Maine," says Tory, coming over to comfort me. "Everyone said that they're going to help you this time, so it'll be even quicker and easier than before to make them."

She gently strokes my head as she reassures me that everything's going to be okay. She really is an amazing older sister.

The storm is so unusually bad that it lasts for two full days before clearing up, so it isn't until after that that the children got permission to go back out to the forest.

The morning sun shines brightly down from an astoundingly clear sky, and the faces of all of these children that can finally go to the forest shine brightly as well. Today, the apprentices aren't working, so a lot of the

bigger kids have joined us as well. We have far more people coming with us today than usual. Ralph, one of Lutz's older brothers, is joining us today. He has an enormous basket strapped on his back, and a bow and a quiver full of arrows hanging at his side.

"Hey, Maine!" he says, cheerfully. "Is your fever doing any better?"

"Good morning, Ralph," I reply. "I got better a little while ago, but as soon as my dad said I was okay to go that awful storm hit." "That really is awful," he says.

He ruffles my hair, then turns to Tory.

"Hey, Tory," he says. "Ralph! It's been a while," she replies.

Ralph, looking remarkably more reliable than he did before, maybe because he's been working on his apprenticeship. Tory, whom I have been carefully polishing in preparation for her baptism, and her radiant smile.

Hey, hey. Don't these two look really good together? They're both really good at taking care of people too, they're a great match.

As I leer at the two of them, Lutz grabs my arm and starts yanking me forward.

"Whoa?!"

"Maine, stop staring off into space. You're the slowest person here, so you've got to be in front when we leave, okay?" "Oh! Sorry."

I join the mass of children, and we all start walking towards the forest. As we pass through the gate, the green, open fields stretch out before us. The scars left by the storm can be seen here and there, where a few of the fields of crops have been torn to shreds.

Come to think of it, does this world have anything like disaster relief?

I stare blankly off into the distance, my feet moving mechanically beneath me. Lutz sticks his hand in front of my face and waves it back and forth.

"Eh?" I say, blinking. "What's up?"

“Oh, I just was wondering if you were actually watching where you were going. Hey, Maine, you’re going to try making those things again, today? Those ‘cley tab-luts’? What are those, anyway?”

Lutz can’t read, so he couldn’t have any idea what I’ve been trying to write down, even if I wasn’t writing in Japanese. More importantly, though, he’s been living a life without written words or even paper at all in his house. He absolutely has no idea about the amazing wonders of permanent media like clay tablets.

I suddenly feel a strange sense of purpose; a desire to proselytize, to spread the good word of the written word.

“Well, so,” I begin, “it’s a thing that I can use to write down things that I don’t want to forget. If you carefully write everything down, you’ll never forget it, you know, because since you’ve written it down you can always go back and look at it again, right? ‘Media’ exist for that reason, and my ‘clay tablets’ are one kind of ‘medium’. Since it’s made out of clay, and since you can knead and mold clay, if you make a mistake when writing, you can use your finger to smooth it out again and start over. You can bake it when you’re done, if you want it to last forever. It’s amazing, right?”

I don’t know if it’s because of the eloquence of my explanation, but Lutz has his mouth hanging open, head tilted to one side.

“...I don’t get it. ...Anyway, what are you trying to write?”

“A story, I’m writing a story. It’s one that Mommy told me, so I want to write it down so that I don’t forget it, you know? What I really want are books, but I can’t get any of those here, so I’m making my own.” “Ahhh, so is that what you’ve been trying to do?”

Lutz’s question suddenly makes me think. Right now, I don’t have even a single book available to me, so I decided that I needed to somehow make my own. What I really, truly want, though, is not making books.

“Nuh-uh, it’s a little different. What I really want is to live a life where I’m surrounded by books. No matter many books are written every month, I want to have all of them, and I want to be able to grow old spending all

of my time reading.”

“Ummm, so... you want books...?” “Yes!! I want them very badly, and I want them right now. But they’re so expensive that I can’t buy them, so they’re way out of my reach. I’ve got no choice but to make them myself, right? Paper is too expensive to buy, so my plan is to make clay tablets, write a story, and then bake it so that I can have it forever.”

At this point, Lutz claps his hands together, and a moment of understanding flashes across his face.

“So, what you’re doing is making a substitute for a book?”

“Yeah! I’ve failed a lot of times so far, so this time I’m absolutely going to make this a big success.” “Ah! Okay, I’ll help out too.”

For whatever reason, Lutz has become so cooperative because I had some ideas about cooking. I kind of want to help him out a little, too.

“So, Lutz, what do you want to do? You’ve heard what I want to do, but do you have anything that you really want to do?”

“I... hmm! I want to try going to other towns. If I become a trader or a minstrel, then I could go a lot of places, and hear a lot of stories, right? There’s a lot out there I want to see.” “That sounds nice...”

Come to think of it, back in Japan, I also used to dream of spending my life traveling to the great libraries of foreign countries and reading all of their books. As visions of my unfulfilled dreams unfold in my head, my gaze drifts off into the distance.

“...You really think so?” he asks. “About wanting to leave this town?”

“A~ah, traveling is good too! Traveling around, going here and there, that sounds fun. I always used to dream about traveling, visiting all sorts of ‘libraries’ all over ‘the world’...” “Ah, I was worried you’d think I was being ridiculous. ...If it’s something you want to do, Maine, I’m sure you’re going to make it happen.” “You too, Lutz. I think you can do it if you try.”

My mind is so crammed full of the countless dreams I had back when I was Urano that I’m far too preoccupied to notice whatever expression

Lutz is wearing on his face right now.

By the time we arrive at the forest, the packed dirt of the road has almost finally dried. We quickly pick a large clearing on the edge of the forest as a good meeting spot.

“Okay, let’s get started gathering,” says one of the older children. “Little kids, don’t go too far from here. Make sure you can always see this clearing, okay?”

The older kids take out their bows and arrows, and take off deeper in the forest. The younger kids hesitate, glancing nervously at me. I may be exhausted just from walking all the way here, but I immediately start looking around the area, worried about the state of my clay tablets.

“Hey, does anyone remember where we put my 'clay tablets'?”

I can’t find the tree we put a mark on the last time we were here. It’s already been quite a few days since I was here last, so I’ve already forgotten, but everyone’s looking around restlessly, troubled looks on their faces.

“We marked a tree somewhere over there, right?” says Fey, pointing off into a distance. Immediately, all of his lackeys start nodding. I had a hunch that that direction was where we needed to be looking, but the storm had knocked down so many trees that it was hard to be sure.

“That’s about where it was, so I guess we just need to start looking around there,” says Lutz, bending down to start looking through some of the bushes. Everyone else starts bustling about together, searching here and there.

It’s not just Fey and his lackeys, everyone is helping search... wow, these are all some really good kids, aren’t they?

“Hey,” says Fey, squatting down low beside a bush. “Isn’t this it?”

Our landmark had been broken apart, so it had been difficult to find, but Fey waves his hand at me, beckoning me over. I rush over with every scrap of speed I can muster to take a look. All I see is a misshapen lump of earth, with vague hints of ruined, illegible characters. Just as I expected,

it's all soggy and muddy, and you can't really even make out that there were words carved into them at all. My tablets have returned to being just lumps of clay.

Ah... back to square one again...

"It... it wasn't my fault this time! I found them like this!" exclaims Fey, hurriedly. "...Yeah," I reply, though it's obvious what happened even if he didn't say anything.

I know that it's not his fault. I know that everyone around me is asking what's going on or wondering what they should do. I know that this is something that I had known was going to happen. Still, I can't stop the tears streaming down my face.

As tiny sobs leak out of me despite my better efforts, I hear footsteps come up behind me. They come up right beside me, and a hand is placed lightly on my head.

"Maine," says Lutz, "if you've got enough time to cry about it, you should use that to make some new ones instead."

His words snap me back to reality. That's right, it's just like he says. I'm finally back out here, with Fey and his friends here to help me rebuild them. I sniff, wiping the snot from my nose off with my sleeve, and lift my head.

As if I'd give up here!

My first defeat was under the boots of Fey and his disastrous lackeys. My second defeat was at the hands of time, cutting me off with the closing of the gates. My third defeat was by the howling storm.

I have fought through man-made calamity and natural disaster! There can't possibly be anything left that can stop me now. I am going to complete these tablets at any cost.

It may be the case that my clay has turned into a shapeless blob, but I can knead and mold it back into flat tablets again. If I don't have enough, then I remember where I can go to get more. This isn't square one. Square one was when I was scratching at the dirt with my blunted wooden shovel,

fruitlessly searching for clay in the wrong spot. This is way different.

Everything's going to be fine.

What I've learned from my mistakes so far is that I either need to finish these in a single day while the weather is still clear, or relocate to someplace with a roof, otherwise this whole thing is futile. We've been blessed by beautiful skies today, and I have three strong, healthy helpers on top of Lutz and Fey to assist me. Whether it's because my tears and rage were effective at guilting them into helping, or whether they're just really eager, I don't know. Either way, with even more people helping me out then there were before, it's definitely going to take far less time to finish.

"It's okay, Tory," I say, "you can go work on gathering. I've got Lutz, Fey, and the others helping me."

"Got it. ...Good luck, everyone!" "Yeah!"

Tory's encouragement helps me pull myself back together, and I get started on once again remaking my clay tablets. Fey and one of his lackeys work on digging out more clay from the ground, then the other two lackeys work with Lutz to knead the clay and form it into the right shape for me. As for me, I've found a slender twig and am carefully carving my story into the surface of the first tablet.

Yeah, yeah! I'm feeling great about this!

"I'm going to need about ten 'clay tablets' to finish writing my story," I say, "so once you've made ten of them, go do your gathering work. Thanks!"

"O... okay!"

One after another, clay tablets are quickly dug up, molded, and lined up next to me. After swiftly finishing ten of them, Fey and the others don't hesitate to race off into the forest.

Lutz, however, stays behind, and starts digging up more clay.

"Lutz, you're not going with them?"

“Ralph’s here today, so I’m going to stay here and help you!” “Hmm! Well, I’ve already got enough clay, so do you want to practice writing?”

On a patch of dirt still soft from the rain, I use my stick to write out “Lutz” in the local alphabet.

“What’s that?” he asks. “That’s your name! If you can’t even write your own name, you won’t be able to go visit other towns, you know?”

Our town basically allows us to walk freely in and out of the gates because they know who we are, but if we try to go to other towns, they’ll ask us for our names and want them written down. That’s what Otto, a former trader, told me. At our gates, the entry lines for people from other towns are actually separate from those for people from our town, and the checks are much more strict for outsiders. If Lutz wants to travel to other towns someday, he should at least know how to write his own name.

“So, this is how you write my name?”

“Yeah! You know, if you want to travel around, it’s a really good idea to learn how to write.”

His eyes gleaming, Lutz practices writing his name on the ground over and over. Meanwhile, I continue diligently working on finishing my clay tablets. Carefully, I carve the first story I ever heard in this world into the tablets, in Japanese. With every stroke of my stick, I tell myself that I’m absolutely going to finish my book.

“It’s done!!”

I’ve finished writing out one of the fairy tales my mother told me. Right now, I want to write an anthology, titled something like “Tales My Mother Told Me”, filled with all of the bedtime stories that my mother packed into my head ever since I was reborn into this world.

I carefully wrap each of my tablets in the old rags I brought with me. I stack them in my basket, taking great care to move them as slowly as possible so that I didn’t risk smudging the words written on them into illegibility.

When I finally have all of them stacked neatly in my basket, I heave an

enormous sigh. My eyes grow hot, and tears shimmer on their surface.

This is my first real triumph! To be honest, clay tablets aren't the kind of medium that most people would think of when they're talking about books, but, no matter what anyone says, this is the first book I've finally acquired in this new world.

It was at the end of autumn that I was reborn into this world, and now we're approaching the end of spring. It has taken a tremendous amount of time, but I have finally acquired my first book.

"Even in a world like this, I can still read a book," I whisper to myself. "... So, everything's going to be okay."

I was reborn into a world where books are far too expensive for poor people to buy, into the body of a child that can hardly do anything without being stricken with fever. I was fine with doing something reckless, and maybe even dying for it. I'd never once imagined that I'd have the body of such a frail little girl. I'd never even considered that I'd be forced to live out my life in a world without books. I didn't even have a fragment of attachment to this new life.

However, I finally have a book in my grasp. I've finally accomplished the one thing that I truly wanted to do. Now, I have something to live for. Now, I can truly see myself living in this world.

"Maine, you finished it?" asks Tory, returning to the clearing with her pack full. "Yeah! I'm finished. Thanks to you, and Lutz."

The emotions I'm feeling for Tory and Lutz may be those that Maine felt for them, and not mine, but making this book has truly saved me.

I carefully lift the topmost cloth and show the two of them the finished tablet.

"Hey, Maine," asks Tory, "What did you write on this one?"

"Oh, this is the story of the children from the stars. It's the story that Mommy told me on my first night." "...Your first night?" she asks, a dubious frown on her face. "Yeah, this is the first story I can remember."

This is the story that my mother quietly recited to me on that first night, when my fever was so painfully high that I couldn't sleep. Her voice may have been full of love and affection, but it was an affection for someone who was not me. Her words and emotions were things I couldn't accept, so they passed right through me, and the feelings of isolation within my disconnected mind only grew deeper.

Despite this, as soon as I decided that I was going to make a book in this world, I immediately knew what it was going to be about. If I capture her bedtime stories in my precious, first book, then I feel like I might truly be able to accept her love.

"I don't want to forget her story at all, so I made sure to write all of it out here so that it'll never go away." Tory smiles, seeming a little bit anxious. "But, it can still be erased, right?"

"If I leave them like this, yeah, but when I bake them, they'll get hard, and then you can't erase them anymore. Then, once I do that, I can always read Mommy's stories."

It's been almost half a year since I started living here, but this is the first time I've ever had an honest, genuine smile.

...This would be an excellent happy note to end my story on, but it does not, of course, end here.

As soon as I returned home, I baked my tablets in our oven. They exploded. No, really. They exploded. I don't know what you're trying to tell me, but I'm not lying.

While they were baking in the oven, there was a boom, and the first book I had ever written flew out of the oven in a cloud of dust and chunks of dirt.

I didn't even have the time to investigate why. First, I was too dumbfounded to ask, then my mother scolded me for quite some time, then she made me promise that I wasn't going to do anything like that again.

Huh? Doesn't this mean that I'm actually, completely back to square one

now? Ah, wait, no, it still feels like I actually finished something, so... three steps forward, two steps back, maybe?

...What the hell do I try next?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The specter from The Ring.
2. A classic Japanese ghost story. Okiku, the vengeful spirit in the story, is obsessed with finding the missing plate from her collection, which was lost and/or broken through treachery.

Chapter 20: Tory's Baptismal Ceremony

Ahh... if only I could have successfully baked my clay tablets. That would have been great. I never even imagined that they might explode.

After that tiny little explosion in the stove, I was forever banned from trying to make clay tablets again. I'd completely run out of book-making plans, so I was only left to ponder what my next method could possibly be. In the meantime, Tory turned seven years old.

Here, it's customary for your seventh birthday to be an enormous celebration. More accurately, it's not the precise birthday that's being celebrated, but instead the season in which you were born. Every season, there is a large baptismal ceremony at the temple, where every child who has turned seven gather to be baptized. Afterwards, the children are able to start working as apprentices, and it seems like that's when they start getting counted as part of the town's population.

For whatever reason, it makes me feel kind of weird to think about religious ceremonies, but if I think of it like Shichi-Go-San², then it doesn't bother me at all. Strange.

Children under the age of seven aren't allowed to enter the temple, so my father and I aren't participating. Incidentally, while I already knew for a while that I wasn't going to be able to attend, my father's absence was forced on him abruptly. Due to some twist of unfortunate luck, he has been summoned for a meeting that he absolutely cannot get out of, on the very day of his oldest child's baptism. On top of that, this is a meeting convened by some very high-ranking members of the aristocracy, so if he didn't attend, his superiors might have his head. Literally.

Scary!

Despite that, my father has been sitting here since early morning, issuing complaint after complaint, seemingly in no hurry to actually head out for work.

"No... I don't want to go to this stupid meeting! It's Tory's baptism, you know? Why'd someone have to schedule this pointless meeting on this

really important day?”

It's very true that today is an important day. I'm sure that aristocrats have children too, so if they also go to get baptized then they should have been well aware of exactly when the ceremony is supposed to take place.

“Huh?” I say, puzzled. “Do the nobles not baptize their kids like we do?”

“...They don't go to the temple to do it, they call the priests out to their houses. So, they don't understand how we feel in the lower classes.”

Last night, I was able to ignore him, since I figured it was better for him to get his complaints off his chest while he was still at home, but this man is obstinate. Perhaps it's a trait common to fathers in every world who love their daughters that they feel this anguished and depressed whenever they miss their daughter's track meet or recital?

I sigh as I carefully comb Tory's long hair out to the sides. “Daddy, we can all go out together, so you need to get ready to go to work! You can walk Tory to the temple, you know. Anyway, only the kids can enter the temple today, so you'd just be waiting in the courtyard, right?”

I think he'll cheer up a little bit if he can lead Tory to the temple and see her standing in line, all dressed up in her beautiful new clothes. Even though I've offered him a good suggestion, he still continues to ramble meaninglessly.

“But it's a father's duty to wait in the courtyard...”

“I thought it was a father's duty to go to work for their family, though?”
“Ngh!” “Is going to work with me really so awful? You're going to go alone, then!”

I push him away, acting like I've lost all ability to care. He turns to me with pleading eyes brimming with tears, seemingly about to start crying at any moment.

“...No, I'll go with you. As soon as the meeting's over, we'll come back, because everyone's going to be celebrating tonight...”

Tory looks over at our father and smiles brilliantly, keeping her head as

still as she can so that I can continue weaving her hair.

“Hey, Dad. I get it, already! You’re going to come back and celebrate with us, right? I’m really looking forward to it, so come back soon, okay?”

“...Yeah!”

With a single sweet smile, my father’s mood suddenly skyrockets. I mentally applaud Tory’s results. You truly are our angel, Tory.

“Maine,” she says, “keep an eye on Dad to make sure he gets his work done today.”

“Leave it to me! I’ll do my best, so you don’t need to worry about that all on your baptism day!” “Hey, Maine!” objects my father. Tory starts laughing out loud.

Yeah, that’s a great smile. It seems like Tory won’t be lonely, even if our father can’t come to her baptism ceremony, since she’s so appreciative of our father’s oppressive love.

“All done,” I say. “...Yeah, Tory, you’re super cute.”

“Thanks, Maine.”

I’ve combed her hair out, separating it to either side, then braided some of the hair on each side back into a half-up style, which I then finished off with her hairpin. The hairpin is something that I made this past winter, using the same colors of thread that were used in the embroidery on Tory’s dress to make a bouquet of tiny lace flowers. The multicolored flowers on the pins match Tory perfectly, giving her a cheerful yet sweet sort of air.

“Well, Tory,” says my mother as she walks into the room, “You’re looking very beautiful.”

“Huh... Mom?”

My mother has dressed up for today, since she’ll be going to the temple with Tory. She’s wearing her only nice dress, a simple, pale-blue affair whose hem falls all the way down to her ankles, just barely letting you see her shoes. I never thought that she could become so beautiful just by

changing her clothes and scrubbing away the red stains from crushing seeds at the dyery.

My mother's got some raw potential underneath all that. She's seriously beautiful.

"Mommy, come sit over here," I say. "I'm fine as I am," she replies. "The way you do up hair is very beautiful, Maine, but also very extravagant. I don't want to draw any attention to myself today; it's the children who should be playing the leading roles."

"Ahh, okay."

It's not like I can really use any ornaments, so I personally wouldn't think that my hairstyling is particularly extravagant, but if my mother says so I guess it must be true. I don't really know what counts as dressing up around here, but it's definitely possible that I could overdo it.

I hop down from the chair I'd been standing on as I worked on Tory's hair. "So, let's go!"

I grab my tote bag with the things I'll need to take with me to the gate, then head out the door with my dressed-up sister. My mother, Tory's chaperone for the day, follows close behind, accompanied by my father, dressed in his work clothes.

Typically, my mother walks at a very brisk pace, even when carrying a lot of things, but today she steadily, carefully climbs down the stairway, holding the hem of her dress up so that it doesn't drag as she walks. Tory hitches up her skirt a little bit as well, mimicking our mother, taking the stairway one steady step at a time. Since I'm in my usual clothing, I don't care at all, and I actually manage to make it to the bottom of the stairs a step ahead of everyone else.

"Whoa..."

A great many people are milling about outside in the plaza around the water well. It seems like everyone's showing up to congratulate the children who are heading off to their baptisms. I can see Ralph and Lutz in the crowd, despite the fact that I'm pretty sure they have nothing to do

with today's ceremony. Everyone seems to be here to give their well wishes to today's stars.

I'm sure there were still ceremonies in the winter and the spring, but back then I really didn't have much strength to leave the house very often, so this is the first time I'm seeing all of this first-hand.

"Fey, congratulations,"

"You're looking pretty manly!"

It seems like pink-haired Fey is having his baptism today as well. Similar to Tory, he's wearing a white outfit with an embroidered sash. His sash is green, though, and looped around his shoulder.

...Ah, I see. Being able to sew really is important.

Since everything around here is hand-made, relative differences in your skills can have a very noticeable effect. In Japan, being good at sewing was really never particularly useful, and everyone here always wears beat-up rags, so even though my mother had told me that being good at sewing was an important skill for a beautiful woman to have, it never really clicked with me until now.

I didn't have anything to compare my mother's sewing skill to, but now that I'm seeing the other kids' clothes, she really is amazing at it. Enough to brag about it, even. As for me, it's becoming clear that it won't be at all possible for me to find a lover, let alone get married.

"Ahh, Tory! You're amazingly cute!" cries Carla, her voice booming through the plaza and her hands clapped to the sides of her face as she praises Tory. Everyone's attention is immediately drawn to Tory, and they start heaping congratulations on her.

"Congratulations, Tory!"

"Your hair is so beautiful, just like a nobleman's daughter!"

Carla continues to lavish praise on Tory, who gives her an embarrassed smile in return. Unlike all of the other children, Tory's hair cuticles are very healthy, so her blue-green hair is glossy. Between the white dress my

mother is so proud of and the halo of light reflecting off of her hair, she looks positively angelic.

My Tory really is an angel. I think I can understand why my dad dotes on her so much.

“Maine worked really hard to braid my hair,” she says. “Huh, she did?” asks Carla. “I guess she has another redeeming feature beyond her unusual recipe ideas.”

Carla, you’re so mean. I breathe a sigh of relief, though: there’s at least one thing that this worlds think that I’m good for.

“This is really complicated. How did you do it up like that?”

“Let me see, let me see!”

Regardless of age, an army of women has formed around us, trying to get a good look at Tory’s head.

Eeeek! This is a really standard hairdo, you don’t need to stare so closely! You people don’t comb your hair our properly, so of course it gets messy when you try to braid it...

“That looks great, Tory!” says one of the younger girls in the crowd, sighing enviously. “I want to do my hair like yours for my baptism this winter.” The crowd around her agrees emphatically, murmuring “me too, me too” in unending waves of sycophancy.

“So everyone wants to Maine to do their hair too?” asks Tory with a delighted smile. She turns to me. “Will you?” I immediately shake my head in refusal. “There’s no way!”

“Why not?” she says, taken aback a little. “I don’t know when my fever’s going to come up again. You know that this is the first time I could actually go to a baptism, right?”

I feel a little bad for Tory, since all she wanted to do was brag about her little sister, but there’s no way I could braid the hair of a bunch of unknown girls every single time a baptismal ceremony came around. On top of that, I can guarantee that it won’t turn out even close to how Tory’s

looks right now. These girls' hair is like Tory's was at the start of all this; rough, unwashed, and in dire need of repair. While I had to touch damaged hair like that when I was just starting out, by now I absolutely do not want to have to feel anything like that again.

"Ah, okay. You've been doing a little better lately, but your fever really does still come back unexpectedly. I was just trying to boast a little about my little sister, that's all."

I'm trying to give off the impression that I really want to agree to Tory's offer despite the fact that I'm such a fundamentally useless burden. Honestly, though, doing that would be psychologically impossible for me.

"...I can still show everyone else how to do their hair like I did yours. I just don't want to promise everyone that I'll do it for them, that's all."

"Yeah, yeah, like Dad was just telling you the other day, don't make promises you can't keep. Hey everyone, Maine said that she can show everyone how to do their hair like mine!"

Tory seems satisfied with the compromise I came up with for her suggestion, so it seems that the plaza in front of the water well is going to become a hairdressing classroom at some point in the future.

I never would have thought, even for a second, that braided hair could draw this much attention. No wonder my mother didn't want me to do hers as well.

"Hey," says one of the girls, "what about that hairpin? Who made that?"

"Maine!" replies Tory. "Nuh-uh," I say, "the whole family did! Me and Mommy made the flowers, and Daddy made the pin part of it." "Ahh, that's right," she says.

My mother, who is very skilled at sewing, didn't know about lacework. It seems that it really is very rare to see it here. All of the older women immediately pounce on me.

"Hey, Maine. Do you think you could teach me how to do that?"

"Showing you how is easy, but if you don't have really tiny needles you

can't do it, you know? Also, I think it might be better for Mommy to show you how to make it, she's way better at it."

I'm already bad at talking to strangers. On top of that, there's a good chance that I might say something really weird, since I lack a lot of the common knowledge people around here should know. As a result, I really don't know what I should be saying to these women. I think the best way to interact with my neighbors is probably to keep them at arm's reach.

Da-dong, da-donng ring the bells of the temple. Whenever the bells in the center of the temple ring, the sound echoes throughout the entire town. In an instant, every flapping mouth in the plaza snaps shut. In the next instant, someone in the crowd yells out, "Time to go, people! To the main street!!"

With the children to be baptized leading the way, we head out towards the main street in groups. At the same time, other groups of children appear from the other alleyways here and there, followed by more groups of spectators. From the edges of the town to the gates of the temple, the procession gathers in the main streets, with the children in their white clothes at the head and their chaperones close behind. The rest of the people line the sides of the streets, seeing their children off as they join the crowd.

This scene really reminds me of, well, you know.

People, cheering and waving, are lined up by the sides of the road while a procession makes its way through the streets. Even if you can't see where the procession is, you can hear the roar of the crowd swell as it grows closer to you. It really reminds me of the New Year Ekiden.³

Starting from far away, I hear the cheering gradually grow closer and closer. When the procession is almost right on top of us, I glance over at Tory. She seems nervous, standing there with a stiff expression on her face. I reach up with my index finger, standing on my tiptoes as high as I can go, and poke her in the cheek.

"Huh?" she says, her eyes going wide. "What was that for?"

"Smile, Tory! You're the cutest girl in the whole world when you're

smiling. It's true, you know!"

After a moment, her wide eyes slowly crinkle up as her usual radiant smile spreads across her face.

"Ugh, come on, Maine," she says, in mock exasperation. "Hey now," says my father, "even when she's not smiling she's the cutest girl around."

What do I do about this man?

As we banter back and forth, the procession comes into view. Loud cheers, applause, and whistles fill the street around me as countless children, dressed in white, parade down the street towards the temple. Some of them are beaming, some have stiff expressions, some walk proudly, and some look very nervous.

Tory and Fey each take a step forward, leaving the crowds of spectators lined up on the side of the streets. They lightly walk towards the stream of children as they pass by, joining the line of children at the very end. Once we see that they've made it into the line, Fey's family and my family both step forward to join the procession as well.

At every bend in the main street, another few children join the crowd. At this rate, I don't even have the slightest idea how many we'll have by the time we finally get to the temple at the center of town.

Even though we're still just walking towards the temple, there's already some parents that are so deeply moved that they've burst into tears. Such as my father.

I follow the procession through the thunderous cheers, halfway jogging to try and keep up. Voices ring out from everywhere around me, so I curiously look around the area as best as I can. People watch us from the windows of the houses that line both sides of the street, some of them throwing tiny white flowers from some unknown plant down on us as some kind of blessing. The flowers thrown from the highest windows drift down gently, almost seeming like they're falling straight from the clear blue skies. The children at the front of the procession start laughing excitedly. I can't see much through the crowd, since I'm far shorter than everyone else around me, but I can see the hands of the children reaching

up towards the sky, perhaps to try to catch the flowers as they fall.

At the large fountain that sits in the middle of the intersections between two main streets, the procession comes to a brief stop. Another group of children, who followed a different path to get here, meets up with ours, and the crowd starts to swell. This is as far as my father and I can go.

“Daddy, come on, this way,” I say, pulling on his hand. It seems like he’s intent on following the procession all the way to the temple, but I grab tightly onto his hand and try to lead him away. I drag him out of the way of the procession to the side of the streets where the sight-seers are standing, and we join them in seeing off the procession as they resume their path towards the temple.

“Tory...” sobs my father, gazing forlornly off in the direction of the temple. “Ugh! Daddy, come on!”

Now that the procession has passed, the crowd of people is starting to thin out as people head back to their homes. I turn us around to follow the crowd, heading back in the direction of the south gate. My father, however, keeps stopping to look back to where the procession has gone, lingering regret in his eyes, leaving me wondering if we’re going to actually make it to his meeting on time.

“Squad Leader! You’re late!” says Otto, glaring angrily at my father as we finally reach the gate. Otto quickly ushers him into the meeting room, leaving me, as usual, to sit down and practice writing on my slate.

It looks like, starting today, I’m going to be learning the names of the goods on the wagons that come in and out of the town, so that I can eventually read the merchants’ cargo manifests. These words are actually the first words I’ve learned from Otto that are actually usable in daily life. Today, all of the words that I’m learning are the names of vegetables that are in season.

There’s a lot of vegetables that I know about already, like “pomay” (the tomato that looks like a yellow pepper), “vel” (a kind of red lettuce), “foosha” (a green eggplant), and so on. Since I know about these, they’re easy for me to remember, but there’s also a lot of them that I haven’t

actually seen on our dinner table. Those will take some more time to memorize.

I really want to head over to the market so that I can match these names to what they look like... but I don't think I can stomach another encounter with the butchers' shops.

As I sit there, alone, slate pencil clacking on slate, one of the younger-looking soldiers bursts into the room, holding some sort of document.

"Do you know where Otto is?" he asks. "I think he's in a meeting today." I reply. "Ah, that's right! Now what do I do..."

It looks like today's gatekeeper isn't particularly good at reading official documents.

"Want me to read it for you?" I ask, holding out my hand. "Huh? You?" he asks, looking at me with an incredibly dubious expression on his face. "I can try; I am Otto's assistant."

I can understand his skepticism; after all, I look like a little girl, not the kind of person you'd expect to be able to read important paperwork. I'm used to seeing that expression by now. I really only offered out of the goodness of my heart, so if he doesn't want to take me up on my offer I don't particularly care either way.

He doesn't react at all to my offer, so after a few seconds I turn my attention back to my slate and continue practicing writing out characters.

"...You can read it?" he asks after a brief pause.

My confidence in my reading ability actually depends a lot on what kind of document it is. I can't yet say that I've memorized everything.

"Umm, if it's a letter of character reference or a aristocratic introduction letter then I can read it. If it's a merchant's cargo manifest then I can read the numbers but not all of the words."

"Ah, well, this is an introduction letter. Could you please?"

These aristocratic introduction letters are written in an unnecessarily overcomplicated style, making them a huge bother to read, but once you

clear past all of the flowery language the meat of the document is actually very simple. All you really need to know is who is referring whom to whom, and whose seal is needed on the document.

I unroll the document, taking a deep breath of the smell of parchment and ink, then scan my skillful eye over the text within.

...Ahh, the leading private is in a meeting right now. This is a lower-ranking nobleman's introduction, so it'll be fine to make him wait until the meeting's over, right?

"Umm, this is a letter of introduction from Baron Bron, and the bearer is going to see Baron Glatz. This needs the leading private's seal."⁴

I hand the document back to the soldier, trying to remember how Otto did his job. If I've got the interaction manual in my head right, I can at least do things like this.

"Please ask the merchant who brought this letter to wait in the waiting room for lower-ranked nobility. Today's meeting was called by a high-ranking nobleman, so they'll have to wait until the meeting is over before the leading private can apply his seal. If you explain this properly, I don't think the Baron's guest will be unreasonable."

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver!"

He salutes me, tapping his chest twice with an upturned fist. I hop down off of my chair, face him, and return his salute. As Otto's assistant, it's only natural for me to be able to do these kinds of things.

Hmmm, at this rate, I'm going to wind up finding work as whatever equivalent this place has to a clerk, it seems...

I'd been thinking that I'd have figured out how to make paper before I started my apprenticeship next year so that I could start a bookstore, but things aren't really turning out like how I envisioned. Reality is pretty crushing, sometimes.

I continue practicing writing out words on my slate for a long time before my father, finished with his meeting, suddenly bursts into the room.

“We’re leaving, Maine!” he says. “Ah, a little wh—” I start to say. “Let’s talk while we’re walking,” he interjects, cutting me off. “Tory is waiting!”

My father stuffs my slate and pencil into my tote bag, picks me up piggyback, and starts walking briskly home.

“Daddy?! Um! I have to repo—”

“Let’s get out of here before Otto catches us.” “Wait!! I have to give Mister Otto a report!”

As we quarrel, Otto catches up with us.

“Oh! Mister Otto! A merchant is here, with a letter of introduction from Baron Bron to Baron Glatz. The leading private was in the meeting, so I had him wait in the lower-ranked nobility waiting room. Please take care of him quickly!”

“As expected of my assistant! Great job, Maine.” “She’s my daughter.” Otto sighs and rubs his temples in response. “I’d only entrust such an important task to such an excellent assistant,” he says to me. “This squad leader here should go home immediately. Thanks to his constant fidgeting during the meeting, the high-ranking noblemen there were glaring at me! I think I lost years off of my life.” “Daddy, life is important,” I say. “Look, you heard it from Otto too: we’re heading home.”

His heart is absolutely set on returning home immediately, so he carries me all the way home as quickly as he can.

In the evening, we throw Tory a birthday party. My image of a proper party involves cake as a very crucial element, but we don’t have anything like that in this house. So, after taking a look at our ingredients, I decided that I’d make some pseudo-french toast.

I took a loaf of hard multi-grain bread and had my mother cut it into thick slices, then took advantage of the fact that Lutz’s family really appreciated my recipes to get some eggs and milk from them. My mother finished everything off by frying each slice in butter. We don’t have sugar, honey, or anything like that, so I garnished it with a bit of jam made from some sort of raspberry-like berry.

I was able to do one more thing for Tory: I cut up the vegetables in the soup into cute shapes, like hearts and stars. She seemed very pleased by this.

“Here, Tory,” says my father, “we have a present for you.”

“Whoa... Dad, Mom, thanks!”

They’ve given her new work clothes, as well as the tools she’ll need for her job. Now that she’s seven years old and has had her baptism, she’ll be starting her apprenticeship. While there are some live-in jobs available, Tory’s work as a seamstress will not be one of them, so she’ll be commuting back and forth.

Aha, she has her sights set on getting good at sewing and becoming a beautiful woman. She wants Ralph to call her a good girl. I understand completely.

“You’re not working every day, right?” I ask. “Well, when I’m just starting out, I’m not going to be able to do all that much, so I’ll only be there about half the week.”

“If they spend every day teaching apprentices, then they’ll never get anything done, after all,” explains my mother.

Certainly. I’ve experienced that first hand: on days when the apprentice soldiers have to be taught writing and math, I don’t get any of my own studying done, and Otto’s work only piles up further.

“And now this is for you, Maine.”

With a heavy clunk, my parents place a long, thin object, wrapped in cloth on the table in front of me. I blink my eyes, doubtfully tilting my head to one side. It wasn’t my baptism today, so I’m not sure why I would be getting a present as well.

“But it wasn’t my baptism today?”

“Since Tory’s going to be going to work, you’ll be in charge of going out and collecting firewood. You’ll be needing this.”

I unwrap the cloth, revealing a knife, dully gleaming in the candlelight.

Its blade is thick, and when I heft it in my hands I can feel its considerable weight. In Japan, it would be unconscionable to give something so dangerously sharp to a young child, but common sense here dictates that a child that doesn't have something like this can't even defend herself, a baby that can't help out or do anything useful.

They really gave me a knife.

Up until now, they've really been totally treating me like a baby. Tory was assisting the family, but I was only Tory's assistant. Or, would it be more accurate to say that I was a burden that only did unnecessary things? However, now that Tory is starting her apprenticeship, it seems like I too must start to carry the proverbial knife.

But, now I've got a knife! I can make mokkan! I'm going to make mokkan!!

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Mokkan are thin, narrow wooden tablets that were used for keeping records in historical Japan. The Japanese term is what's used in academic literature on the subject, so I'm leaving it as-is.
2. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to "seven-five-three".
3. The New Year Ekiden is a long-distance relay race held every New Year between teams from major Japanese corporations.
4. "Leading Private" is a military rank. In the US Army, the equivalent rank is Private First Class.

Chapter 21: I'm Making Mokkan!

Tory was seriously amazing as an older sister.

First of all, I can't fetch water. I can't even pull it up from the well! I lack the necessary strength. On top of that, even though I can only draw up a little to begin with, hauling it up the stairs is extremely difficult as well. If I wanted to get a single bucket's worth of water up to my home, I need to make five trips. Our household, however, doesn't need just one bucket of water. I need to fill up our entire jug. When my mother helps me fetch the water, she manages to fill the jug in about the same amount of time it takes me to fill just one bucket.

I'm useless.

When it comes time to start preparing lunch, I need to light the fire in the stove. When I was still in school, we went on class camping trips, so I know how to stack logs for making a fire. You stack the fat fuel logs with the slender, easier-to-burn kindling in a way that air can easily pass through, then use some sort of tinder, like dry grass, that catches sparks and burns hot and quick. That, I can do.

However, I can't actually light the fire. When I went camping, we had lighters. Here, we have flint, which I have no idea how to use at all. I watched Tory do it once, then later tried to mimic what she did.

"Wha-?!"

When I struck the two chunks of flint against each other as hard as I could, sparks flew out, as could be expected. The flash of glittering sparks right before my eyes caused me to flinch back in shock, dropping both stones to the floor. Ever since then, I've been afraid that those sparks might burn me like the sparks from fireworks, so I haven't been able to muster up the courage to strike them together hard enough to spark. Eventually, my mother wound up doing it.

I'm really useless.

If it's helping out with cooking prep work, I can do at least that... or so I

thought. However, the kitchen knife is so heavy that I have to use both hands to lift it. Plus, when I look at the trussed-up birds we need to prepare, I freeze up. All I can really do is chop up the ingredients that I can use a smaller knife on and provide recipe ideas. There's very little else I can actually do in the kitchen. I'm so short that I can't even stir things around in a frying pan, even if I'm given a stool to stand on. My mother really does praise me on my recipes, but my lackluster contributions only serve to make me increasingly depressed.

I'm seriously useless.

Tory arrives home from her first day at work to find me sitting in the corner, a dull, depressed look on my face. "What's wrong, Maine?" she asks.

I'm too depressed to even answer, so my mother does so for me. "...She tried to help out today, but couldn't do very much at all. I think she's depressed about how little she could actually do."

"Huh? Now?"

Yes, Tory, now. It may have taken some time, but I finally realized it. I am completely worthless.

"...I tried to do so many different things, but I couldn't do any of them at all," I mumble. "Well, we know what your condition is," says my mother reassuringly, "so as long as you're trying your best it'll be alright, right?"

"Also, there's nobody better at cleaning than Maine!"

I have some experience pushing a broom and wiping things down; those are things that I can manage to do even if I only barely have the strength to do it. If I put too much power into it, though, my fever comes back immediately. Also, my constant cleaning efforts are not done because I want to help the family out. I'm doing it because I absolutely cannot stand living in such a filthy environment. It's for my own sake, not my family's.

In modern Japan, where we have machines to do all of the heavy work for us, I could clean, do laundry, and cook from start to finish, all by myself. Here, however, I can't do any of that at all. Honestly, I didn't think

that it would be anywhere near this hard. Tory's only a year older than me and she can do it with no problems. I, however, am stuck with this inexplicably weak body, and am just dead weight.

When I somehow got reincarnated, I really would have preferred a much more robust physique. At least, robust enough to not be a hindrance.

"Ahaha, Maine," laughs my father, "are you bothered that much by being useless?"

"...Yeah, I am." "Well, even if that's the case... I never really had any high hopes to begin with." "Uh?"

Huh? Why is he saying something so unexpectedly cruel? Why is he smiling?

"Well, I think it's a bad thing that you keep collapsing as if you're about to die. I think you've done more than enough already to make yourself stronger." Tory is the one to shrug her shoulders at that. "I think what you're saying is right," she says, "but at this rate nobody's ever going to hire her, right? She can't do anything at all." My father shakes his head. "Not at all, she can work at the gate!"

"Huh? What can she do there?"

Tory and my mother both look at my father in bewilderment. Why they're bewildered, I have no idea.

Have they just been not paying any attention at all when I've been telling them what I do all day at the gate? Or did they just not believe me at all?

"What can she do? Paperwork, of course! Even now, when she goes to the gate she does some work as Otto's little assistant. ...More than half the time, he's teaching her how to write, though."

"Really?! I thought she was just going there to take breaks!" "I thought she had to have been making up all of those ridiculous stories!"

Tory, why are you acting so surprised? Also, mother, that's mean! Their excessively honest reactions feel like a stab in the gut.

"She's especially suited for work that involves a lot of calculations. If she

wanted, after her baptism she could work at the gates officially. How about it, Maine? Want to come work with your daddy?”

“Huh? Nuh-uh. I’m going to run a ‘bookstore’ or be a ‘librarian’.”

Unfortunately, I have zero ambition to follow my father to work every day in order to do the gatekeepers’ paperwork. However, this is a world that hasn’t yet seen bookstores or libraries, so of course everyone looks at me doubtfully, not understanding what I said at all.

“...Aaahh, Maine. What are those?”

“Someone who sells books... so, a merchant, I guess? Hmmm, maybe being a merchant isn’t quite right for me, but I’m going to do a job that involves a lot of books.” “Well, I don’t really get what you’re saying, but I think that it’s great if you can do the things you want to do. For now, doing the things you can do is just fine. Half a year ago, you couldn’t walk to the forest at all. You could barely even go outside! Now, you can go in and out of the house as much as you want on your own.” “...Yeah.”

Today, I was told that I needed to go out and do my best to gather some firewood, so I strapped a wicker basket to my back and went with Tory off to the forest. It’s true that I can indeed walk all the way to the forest, just like my family said, but by the time I get there, I need to take a long rest, and if I’m not very careful about how much I move around I might need to spend the entire next day in bed.

I really hate this feeble body.

When we got to the forest, I took a break to catch my breath, then I got up and started to help search for firewood. All I’m doing is looking around for branches that have fallen off already, but Tory actively searches for low-hanging branches, then hacks at them with a knife that’s like a small machete. They break off with a creak and a snap!

“Wow, Tory really is amazing...” I say aloud, once again impressed by Tory’s raw competency. “I’ve got to keep working hard too, doing whatever I can.”

I redouble my efforts, working until I run out of breath. I sit down on a

nearby rock to take a break. Without wasting any time, I pull out my knife, intending to start make mokkan.

“Whoa, this is really heavy,” I sigh, feeling the weight of the dully gleaming blade in my hands. Knives aren’t something that I have literally zero familiarity with. In Japan, I used kitchen knives and box cutters in my day-to-day life.

However, I have basically no experience with whittling. What little I do have comes from elementary school, where we had a lesson on sharpening our pencils with little blades. At the time, however, I decided that using a pencil sharpener was good enough for me and barely paid any attention. Now, I’m regretting that decision.

Even if I decide to brave the dangers and try making mokkan anyway, I still don’t know how to use a knife, though!

When I can’t do more than timidly scrape wood off a pencil, there’s no way I’d be able to wield a knife like this with any amount of skill. Will I really be able to make mokkan?

As an experiment, I dig through my pile of gathered branches until I find a thin branch, then I try to shave a layer off of it. It’s difficult to manage with my tiny, weak hands, but I peel off a sizable strip of bark, revealing the color of the wood inside.

Ah! This might be a little bit on the difficult side, but I think I can do it!

I can simultaneously practice using my knife and make mokkan as well, killing two birds with one stone. With glee, I start pulling out the pieces of wood that I had gathered, whittling them until they’re long, narrow, straight, and flat, then cut them to the same length and lay them out next to each other. Once I tie these together with a thin cord, I’ll be able to roll them up like a scroll, and they’ll really be mokkan. I think I can turn these into something about the size of a page from a memo pad.

Ancient civilizations, ancestors, thank you for your magnificent wisdom. Mother, father, thank you for this magnificent knife. It is thanks to you that I can make these mokkan.

Since the raw materials for these are just pieces of wood that I can pick up from the ground, this involves far less labor than carefully extracting grass fibers to make papyrus or doing the back-breaking excavation work needed to get the clay to make tablets.

Excellent.

At my level of skill, I need to whittle away bit by bit to get each stick planed flat enough that I can write on it. It would be amazing if I could slice it all off in a single, powerful stroke, but there's really no point in wishing for the moon. I steadily whittle away at each stick, piling more and more finished mokkan next to me. With my hands as they are now, all I can whittle are fine, slender sticks. If I want to be able to actually write a book, the number of these things I'll need is not trivial at all.

"Maine, what are you making to replace your clay tablets?"¹ says Lutz as he walks over, seemingly done with gathering firewood for the day, and leans in to inspect my handiwork.

That was not the question I expected him to ask at all. I look at him quizzically.

"...Huh? Why do you think I'm making these to replace my tablets?"

"Because you looked like you were having so much fun, right?" "Huh? I looked like I was having fun?" "Yeah, you looked like you wanted to rub your face all over those sticks. It was the same kind of expression you had when you saw all the clay for the first time, you know?"

Huh? I was sitting alone, whittling, with an expression that looked like I wanted to bury my face in a pile of wood? ...Wouldn't that make me look really strange?

...Yiiikes! I didn't realize that at all! That's extremely embarrassing!

The embarrassment of having that so unexpectedly pointed out to me makes my insides squirm, but Lutz is very focused on examining my handiwork.

"So, what are you making?"

“...I’m making ‘mokkan’.” “‘Moe-kahn’? Are you going to be writing on these too?” “Yeah, which is why I need a lot of them. I’m not very strong, so I can’t make them any bigger than this.”

I pick up my knife again and start whittling away. Lutz sits down next to me and grabs a somewhat larger stick of his own.

“I’ll help you out! Do me a favor in return though: the next time you see that Otto guy you were talking about, could you ask him something for me?”

“What do you want to know?” He glances around the forest clearing nervously, then leans in close to whisper in to me quietly. “I want to hear what it’s like to be a trader...”

A while ago, he shared with me his dreams of becoming a trader or a minstrel, traveling from town to town and seeing the world.

Based on the fact that he was so cautious about checking to see if anyone was around and the fact that he kept his voice so low, I wonder if this world looks down on traders and minstrels? I don’t really know. My personal opinion, lacking any grounding in this world’s common sense, is definitely not worth as much to Lutz as what I could get from Otto if I asked him about it.

“He’s a very busy man, but I’ll try asking him. He might refuse, though, sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he replies.

He breathes a sudden sigh of relief, looking like someone who has just set down a very heavy burden. He’s finally found someone to talk to about something that he couldn’t share with anyone.

We don’t talk very much after that, and just quietly sit making mokkan. It looks like Lutz carries a large, wide-bladed knife like Tory’s, so he’s able to easily turn relatively thick branches into several wide boards each. I take those and use my own knife to clean up the writing surfaces until both sides are flawless.

I wonder if I’ll be able to get someone to give me some of the ink that we

use at the gate?

Fundamentally, ink is something that is used with paper, so it's not the kind of thing that you can ordinarily find in stores around here. Now that I think about it, the ink at the gate is locked up as carefully as the parchment is. It might not just be paper that's expensive, but ink as well.

Hopefully, I'll be able to convince Otto to stop paying my salary in slate pencils and to switch over to paying me ink. And, while I'm at it, I'll be able to convey Lutz's request.

The next day, I go to the gates.

It's a day where Tory has work and is thus not available to supervise me, so I head to the gates to study. Lately, the number of words I've been learning that are actually usable day-to-day has been increasing, which makes me very happy.

Starting today, we have three new apprentice soldiers; Tory's contemporaries. Otto has to teach them how to read, write, and do math, so he's suddenly very busy. After he finishes with training the new recruits, he immediately returns to the duty room and does all of the normal day-to-day work he has to do.

I myself am very busy, between learning new vocabulary and helping with computation, so I don't have very many opportunities to talk. When I notice Otto finish up one set of paperwork and start working to clean up the ink bottle, I seize my chance.

"Mister Otto, I've got a question I want to ask, is now okay?"

"Sure, what is it?" "How do you become a trader?" "Huh?! Maine, you want to become a trader?! Huh? Wait a minute! Is this my fault? Squad Leader's going to murder me!"

With huge, panicked eyes, Otto hunches forward over the desk, muttering hysterically. I'm shocked by this sudden display, and quickly wave my hands to try to dispel his fears.

"No, no, it's not for me, it's for a friend."

“Ah! Well then, you should tell them that they shouldn’t try.” “Oh, it really is like that?”

Based on his terse response, it would seem like peddling is indeed an objectionable profession.

“What do you mean by ‘like that’?” he says, his eyes narrowing. I briefly contemplate how to phrase things in an easy-to-convey manner, then open my mouth to speak.

“Ummm, when my friend asked me about it, he made sure that nobody was around, and he was whispering, so I thought that maybe people thought it wasn’t a good job to do.”

“Well, his parents would give him a good talking to, anyway.” “Also, traders are always traveling, right? They’re always going here and there, thinking about what they need to buy in one place and what they need to sell in another, right? Settling down is a completely different lifestyle, where you can have familial bonds and even repeat customers, so it’s not the kind of thing that you’d think a kid who lives in a town would suddenly think that they’d want to do...”

That kind of free-wandering nomadic lifestyle seems like the kind of thing that the children of farmers, who are expected to settle down, would be drawn to. Life is so fundamentally different here, to the point where my own common knowledge doesn’t connect with it at all. Working seems to be far more strict of a thing than I was expecting.

Every day, I do things that completely backfire, and I often have no idea of why they could have possibly done so. You’d think that at some point the correct answer to be to do nothing, but even if I did nothing I’d still wind up being criticized. There’s no manual for the mass of unwritten rules that govern daily life here. I, the woman who has no idea what the correct thing to do is in this unexpected alternate reality and just wants to shut herself inside forever, do truly understand the barriers of common sense.

Well, if I were to lock myself inside, I wouldn’t have any books, so I wouldn’t have anything to do, so I basically have to go outside anyway.

“...Well, if you know that much, why didn’t you tell him?”

“Hmm, well, I think that it would be better if he heard it from you, Otto. I’ve been living in a town all my life, but you’ve got a lot of experience, so I think he’d listen to you. Also, my daddy said that you have some connections with the merchant guild, right? If my friend can’t become a trader, then maybe he could do his apprenticeship under a merchant instead. I was thinking that maybe he could still leave the town from time to time to go buy things.”

As far as Lutz’s family goes, I think they’d be much more comfortable if his travels were to known parts of the world on official business, rather than aimlessly wandering through distant lands.

“Ahhh, I see what’s happening here!” he says, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a sly grin. “Since you’re making all this effort to be the middleman here, this kid must be your favorite, right?”

He seems to have caught a whiff of a secret love story. I shrug my shoulders.

“It’s not that he’s my favorite,” I say off-handedly, “it’s that he’s always helping me out, so I feel like I should return the favor before the debts start stacking up too high.”

“The kid who’s helping you, is that the blond one?”

Otto must have seen us one on of the times that Lutz, serving as my pacemaker, came through the gate, dragging my exhausted self back from the forest, stopping briefly to deliver a report to my father in exchange for a little bit of pocket money.

“That’s right. I know that you’re super busy with the newcomers, though, so if you can’t do it...”

“This is actually the least-busy season in the entire year, so this is a great time. How about during the next holiday?” “Thanks, Mister Otto!”

Although, if this is supposed to be the least busy season, how much work am I going to actually have when it’s time for me to help out with the treasurer’s report and the budget compilations? I’ve already agreed to

help, though, so that's not something I want to thinking about.

"Ah! Mister Otto, I've got one more thing I want to ask: could I please have a little bit of this ink, if you can?"

"You mean this ink?" he says, frowning as he taps the closed lid of the inkwell with one finger. The black liquid within sloshes slightly. I nod vigorously. "Could you maybe pay me in ink instead of slate pencils from now on?" "That's three years' wages, and I'm not giving you an advance." "What?!"

His instantaneous reply leaves me dumbfounded, my eyes wide with shock. I want to believe that I absolutely must have misheard him, but his expression is very serious as he starts to explain.

"After you move from assistant to apprentice, your wages are going to change, but right now, even including the bonus you'll get from helping with the budget, it'll take you three years, I think."

"Three years?! ...That's expensive!"

My expression is one of utter shock. There's no way I could have possibly expected that it would be that expensive. Otto's wry smile says that he's going to have to start teaching me the names of the things on our budget.

"Even here, we only ever use it for the official paperwork that the nobility gives us, right? It's far too pricey of a thing for a child to play with."

In other words, this is absolutely not a thing that I will be able to purchase for myself. Understood.

...If that's the case, what should I use to write on my mokkan? Even if I have the boards, they're useless if I can't write on them, right?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Lutz uses the actual word for "clay tablets" here, as opposed to a phonetic pronunciation. This would indicate that either the Japanese word

has entered his vocabulary as a loanword or they've found an equivalent term in their native tongue. (Or the author goofed.)

Chapter 22: Ink Making and Mokkan - The Conclusion

“Gaaah! I solved my paper problem, but now I have to get ink, too! Why meee!”

It's three years' worth of work, you know?

My options here are: buy it, find it, be given it, steal it, and make it. Thinking about it, the only real option I have is to make it.

After all, there's no way I can actually steal any from the night duty room...

It seems like it's not just books that I have to hand-make, but ink as well. Even so, is making ink even something that I'm capable of doing? I know that it involves a pigment and a drying oil, but will I be able to acquire whatever pigments and oils exist in this world?

“Wouldn't it be great if I could just find an 'octopus' or a 'squid'? Where the heck is the ocean?!” I shout, tightly clutching the mokkan I've been carving. Lutz, sitting next to me, flinches. “What now?!” he says, turning to look at me. “Lutz, can you think of anything here I can use as ink?! Or even a way I can make it?!”

Of course, going on a journey to the ocean and fishing up a octopi and squid is unrealistic. However, I can't think of a single thing amongst my possessions that I could use to make either a liquid or solid ink.

“What's 'ink'?”

“Ummm, it's a black liquid, that you use for writing on things like these boards...”

Explaining the concept of ink to someone who'd ordinarily never see anything like it is rather difficult. Lutz tilts his head in confusion as I try to lay it out for him.

“A black thing? If you don't mind unclean sorts of things, then do you think maybe ash or soot might work?”

“Yeah, that! I’ll try that!”

If I’m going to use ash or soot, then that’s something that my home always has around in the cinders of our fireplace. This is something that I can undoubtedly get immediately.

As soon as I return home, I immediately try asking my mother.

“Mommy, can I use some of this ash?”

“No, you can’t,” she replies immediately, rejecting me without any hesitation. “Huh? Why not?” “We use ash to make soap, melt snow, dye things, sell to farmers... it has a lot of uses, you know? Please don’t arbitrarily waste any of it.”

Come to think of it, when spring came around, I helped scatter ashes around for some incomprehensible reason, like I was in Hanasaka Jiisan.¹ I guess that was for melting snow, huh? I only just figured that out now. If we need to use a lot of it for making soap, then I guess it really is an important material.

Since we can sell whatever’s left over, it seems like it would be difficult for me to acquire any ash, but I wonder if my other option, using soot, would be feasible?

“Then, Mommy, could I use the soot?”

My mother scowls a little bit after I asked for another thing, but after a moment she suddenly breaks out into a smile.

“Well, I don’t know what you want to use it for, but, sure, you can have some soot.”

“Oh, yay!” “You can have whatever you can sweep out of the stove. You can get even more if you clean out the chimney too, you know!” “Wha?! ... Ah... right. ...I guess, you’re right.”

My grinning mother has taken advantage of my plight, and now I get to sweep out the chimney. This wasn’t what I’d expected to have to do, but if it’s for the sake of gathering soot, then I’ve got no choice. With fire in my eyes, I grab the narrow broom we use for sweeping the chimney, only to be

stopped by my mother, her grin slipping from her face.

“Wait just one second, Maine! Are you planning on doing that in those clothes?!”

“...Huh? I shouldn’t?”

These clothes are already kind of dirty and worn-out, so I have no idea how it could possibly be a problem for me to sweep out the stove in clothes like this. I look skeptically at my mother as she goes to get her sewing kit and the box of old cleaning rags.

“I’ll make you something better, wait for a moment.”

With high spirits, my mother stitches together some clothing made out of cleaning rags with lightning speed. I change into my new cleaning-rag clothes, then decide that it wouldn’t do at all for my hair to get stained with soot, so I pin it up and use another rag as a bandana to cover my head.

Wow, I never thought I’d be doing Cinderella cosplay, but here I am.

First of all, I scrape the ashes out of the bottom of the fireplace and set them aside. After that, I stick my head in the oven and start knocking down and collecting all of the soot that I can. This is probably the first time I’ve actually been glad to have such a small body. I can’t deny my mother’s smile, so while I was at it I started sweeping out the chimney to collect the soot from there as well. As black particles crumble from the walls, the chimney starts looking cleaner and cleaner, and the pile of my much sought-after soot grows taller and taller.

This is way more fun than I thought it was going to be when I started out, and I got so engrossed in it that I wound up pushing myself too hard. The next day, my fever came back and I was laid out all day.

I may be covered in soot, I may have collapsed, but I somehow managed to collect my pile of soot. Now I need to get my health back as well... I really want to get better enough today to start working on writing with this soot.

“Maine,” asks Lutz, “what do we do with this?”

“I think we try water first?”

The first step that I came up with is dissolving the soot in water. I feel like it might turn into something ink-like. Somehow. I scoop a little bit of water from the river into a wooden bowl add some soot, and then stir it round and round with a piece of wood. The soot doesn't seem to dissolve very well, and most of it just floats on top of the water.

“It turned out like this, huh...” I mumble. “Well, I wonder how well you can write with it?”

I nod at him, then dip the sharpened stick we're using in place of a pen into the bowl. Tentatively, I try marking the top of one of my mokkan with its page number, “1”. However, way more of the soot stuck to my stick than to the wood of the board, and the number that I wrote is so faint as to be illegible.

“Ah, man... That's a failure.”

“What's next?” “Hmmm, well, my original theory was that I should try mixing the soot with oil, but...”

Oil is one thing I can't request from my mother. Vegetable oil is used not only in a lot of our cooking, but I also use a lot of it to make my simple shampoo, so we never have enough of it. Also, animal-based oils are used for making candles and soaps, so I think that's not something I can easily get either. Probably, my mother would shoot down my request as quickly as she did when I asked about the ashes.

“Using oil, huh. I guess you couldn't get any?”

“Yeah, it's impossible. Is there nothing else we could try...?”

Searching for hints, I flip through in my mind all of the Japanese writing implements I can think of.

“Ah, the 'paints' that were used in 'Japanese painting' used 'gelatin glue'... but, I'm not allowed to use any fire, so that's not going to work.”

In the future, I might be able to try making a gelatin-based ink, but right now I don't have that kind of setup. If I were to be able to use gelatin, then

I could make paints out of natural materials, so my options would dramatically increase. However, I can't actually wait until I grow up.

"Heeey, Maine, you still with me?" says Lutz, waving his hand back and forth in front of my face to bring my thoughts back down to earth. "Snap out of it."

"Hmmm, well, it's probably okay if it's not a liquid. We could make something like 'crayons' or 'chalk' or... 'pencils'... Ah, right! We can use clay! Let's mix it with clay!"

"Huhh?" he says, an extremely skeptical look on this face. "If I'm not mistaken, mixing 'graphite' with clay will give me something like 'pencil lead'. Like, um... 'conté', maybe...? Well, whatever. We're using soot, not 'graphite', but I think it'll work out!"

Mix soot and clay, make it into round, slender sticks, then let them dry out. Once they harden up, I may actually be able to write with them.

"Lutz, back when we were making 'clay tablets', we dug up the clay somewhere around here, right?"

"We don't have to dig any up, actually. Last time, we dug up more than we used, and I think we put the leftovers somewhere around that rock."

Just like he says, there's a small pile of clay over there. I take a bit of it, then knead soot into it until it's thoroughly mixed. My mental image here is something like a Coupy Pencil³ or the core of a pencil. If touching it doesn't blacken your fingertips, it won't produce a usable color.

Both my hands and the rock that I'm using as a work surface get stained pitch black as I work. I roll my soot pencils into long, slender tubes, then cut them down to about the length of a pencil. If these harden up when they dry, then this will be a great success.

I try to wash my hands off in the river, but they don't get much cleaner. I'm going to have to scrub down with soap when I get home. These persistent stains, however, make me feel like I'll definitely be able to write with these.

"How long should we let these dry for, I wonder?" I say. "Who knows?"

“Should we maybe try baking them?” “Let’s not do anything unnecessary. They might explode again.” “Urgh...”

Over the next few days, my soot pencils gradually start to dry out and solidify. I wrap one in an old dust rag so that I’ll be able to use it without staining my hands. After that, I use my knife to sharpen the tip, then try writing a letter.

It writes! It may crumble very easily in my grip, but for now, I can write with these. These will be less like books and more like antique media, but this works.

“We did it! Lutz, it writes!”

“Oh! Good job.”

I, having made my own writing implements from scratch, cheerfully work on making more mokkan. Since I have a guaranteed source of materials as long as I go out to gather firewood, I can accumulate these things very cheaply. The best part about this is that I’m able to do everything, from start to finish, with my own power. The only major problem with these is that they’ll be very bulky when they start to pile up, but that was going to be a problem with clay tablets, anyway. I’ll just have to deal with it until I’m an independent adult.

My pile of completed mokkan grows to satisfaction, but one day I return from the forest to unexpectedly find that they’ve disappeared. The place I’ve been stockpiling them is suddenly empty.

“G... gone?! They’re gone? What?!”

“What’s wrong, Maine?”

As I frantically search through the storeroom for my missing mokkan, my mother pokes her head in to see what’s the matter.

“Mommy, do you know what happened to the ‘mokkan’ I left here?”

“‘Moe-kahn’? Well, what are those?”

“Ummm, they’re pieces of wood, and they’re a bunch of different sizes, but they’ve all been flattened on both sides so that I can write on them...”

“Ah, the firewood you brought back? I used it, you know?” “Uh? Huh? You used it? Why?”

My head suddenly goes completely blank.

“It was the firewood that you worked so diligently to bring back after you worked so hard to get strong enough to help out, you know? It wouldn’t be nice for me to not use it.”

“But, the pile of firewood is over there, right? Why did you use the pile that I specifically kept separated from that? Those were a compilation of the fairy tales you told me to get me to sleep at night!” “Aw,” she says, stroking my head, “if you want me to tell you stories, all you need to do is ask.” She smiles, thinking that her daughter will still be spoiled rotten no matter how much time may pass. “That’s not what I meant...”

Not a single one is left. I stare blankly at the spot where my mokkan used to be, and all of the strength leaves my body. All of the effort I put into them, all of the struggle, was for naught. They’re cinders. When I think about that, I don’t think I can get motivated for anything again.

The moment my strength fails me, a heat that was buried deep inside my body explodes out. A fever, stronger than the ones I get after getting too excited or working too hard, blasts through me in an instant. In its grip, my limbs go numb and I lose all ability to move.

“What’s...”

Without any understanding of what could possibly be happening within my body, I suddenly collapse, whimpering like I was trapped in a nightmare.

My consciousness trembles as I slowly sink deeper into the churning, swirling fever. I feel like I’m slowly dying, bit by bit, under the fever’s relentless assault. It’s only now that I’m experiencing it firsthand that I can clearly comprehend how the real Maine could have been swallowed whole by a fever like this.

As I slip further and further away, without even the willpower to struggle against it, flashes of worried faces pass through my

consciousness, my family members looking in, concerned, to check on me. Lutz's face is among them.

...Why... is Lutz...?

I push my way up towards him, and my submerged consciousness starts to float back to the surface. I strain my temples, pushing even harder, and everything comes into focus. This isn't just an image that floated itself across my mind. I've consciously managed to get Lutz focused in my field of view.

"Maine?" he says, his eyes wide. "...Lutz?"

"Mrs. Eva!" he yells, turning towards the kitchen. "Maine w...woke up!"

My mother rushes into the room.

"Maine. You collapsed so suddenly, and I thought you'd never wake up again!"

"Yeah... sometimes, I saw your face. I'm sorry to make you worry. ... Mommy, my throat is really scratchy. I feel really sticky too, so I want to wash myself off. Could you bring me some water?" "Alright, I'll be right back," she says, turning to leave.

As soon as I see her step out, I grab Lutz's hand tightly. I still can't even raise my head, lying down like this.

"...Lutz," I whisper, "I failed again. My mother burned all of my 'mokkan'."

"Oh maaan... Well, they do really just look like weirdly-shaped cuts of wood." "But I put so much effort into them, and I put them aside on purpose..."

I can't take anymore. Fate itself has decreed that I'm never going to finish my book.

I sigh in defeat, and I can feel the fever start to come back to life. I shake my head to clear it before I'm pulled under again.

"Don't get so down," says Lutz. "Doesn't that just mean that we should try something that doesn't burn well?"

My mokkan were made out of wood, so they were used for firewood. If that's the case, then we should make them out of something that won't get burned. Lutz's suggestion is like a spark of light in the darkness.

Now is not the time to be drowning in fever. I need to think of a good replacement material. I focus all of my willpower inward, feeling like I'm grabbing hold of the fever and squeezing it down into the tiniest ball I can.

"...What do you think we could use that wouldn't burn?" I say, after a long pause. I've put some thought into it, but I really can't come up with anything, either because my mind is still hazy from the fever or because I just don't know what I could find around here that would work. "Ummm, maybe, bamboo, or something like that?"

"Ah!! ...Lutz, you're a genius!"

Bamboo pops when it burns, so it's probably not the kind of thing that you'd simply burn. Hope floods through me once more. When that happens, for some reason my fever starts going down as well, and I can breathe a little more comfortably.

"Oh, what are you talking about?" asks my mother, entering the room carrying a bucket of water. Lutz and I glance at each other. "It's a secret," I say, with a little grin. "Maine," says Lutz, "I'll go out and get that, so you absolutely need to make sure you get better, okay?"

"Thanks, Lutz! You're so sweet." His eyes go wide. "Th-this is just so you'll introduce me to Otto!" he yells, fleeing from the room. "I'm paying you in advance, so you'd better get healthy! Got it?!"

As his footsteps fade away, I start to scrub myself down with the water that my mother brought in for me.

This fever was strange. I can't think of a single disease that would cause a fever to suddenly explode out like that, especially not one that would slowly devour at my consciousness. Plus, I've definitely never heard of any sort of fever that could be forced aside through sheer willpower alone. What the heck kind of sickness is this, wriggling around in my body?

When I first came here, I was getting feverish fairly regularly, but I didn't

think that was particularly strange. However, once I managed to train my body into being a little bit more robust, then the strangeness of my fevers became much more apparent. What the heck could be wrong with this body? My family, however, is not at all affluent enough to afford a doctor in this world, and there's no encyclopedia of common diseases around, so this isn't something that I can immediately research.

...Well, if I concentrate on bringing down my fever, it seems to go down slowly, so maybe we'll just wait and see?

After two more days of thinking about dealing with my fever, Lutz comes to my home in the evening, with a bundle of bamboo that he cut down to the perfect size for use as bamboo slips.⁴ He even shaved off all of the skin, so I can start writing on them right away.

"Don't even think about touching these until you're healthy again," he says, sternly. "Got it? If you break this promise, I'll never help you again."

"Okay. Thanks, Lutz."

I hold on to just one slip, and ask my mother to put the rest of them in the storage room. I'm still too sick to get out of bed, but as soon as my fever's gone down all the way, I'll be able to write on these and then finally finish my work. My first priority, then, is to get better.

Holding tightly to the bamboo slip that Lutz brought me in one hand, I gradually drift off to sleep. Just when I was almost completely out, though, loud cracks start piercing through the air.

"Gyaah?!" screams my mother from the kitchen. "W... what?! What happened?"

Crack after crack rings out from within the oven, like there's something inside that's bursting open. My mother storms into the room, livid.

"Maine! What did Lutz bring into this house?!"

"...Bamboo?" "Ugh! That was misleading! I thought he was bringing us firewood, since you can't go and get any!"

I suddenly realize the source of those cracking sounds. She burnt the

bamboo, thinking that it was firewood. It sounds like it's exploding with far more force than the bamboo that I'm used to; is bamboo different in this world?

"Oh, did you mistake it for firewood, since the skin was already shaved off? ...Wait, don't bamboo and wood look different, though?"

"Bamboo and vanihitz wood look very similar, you know?" "I've never seen that kind of tree before, so I guess I didn't know..."

I don't recognize the name of that tree. At least, when I was at the forest, I didn't see any sort of tree that resembled bamboo.

"What are you talking about? That's the wood you were using to weave baskets with Tory during the winter. It's what your own basket's made out of!"

"Oh, I remember now. I guess they really do look similar once you peel off the bark."

I remember, now that I think back to the preparations that Tory had been doing for her basket-weaving winter work. Vanihitz wood looks like any other wood while the bark is on, but it looks very much like bamboo once it's peeled off.

"Anyway, don't bring any more bamboo into the house. It's dangerous! Are we clear?"

"...Yes..."

Bamboo is forbidden as well. Yeah, I was afraid of this, ever since I heard those first pops. I'm sorry, Lutz, since you tried so hard...

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hanasaka Jiisan is a Japanese folktale.
2. Conté are a kind of crayon, which are made of compressed graphite or charcoal and use either clay or wax as a base.
3. Coupy Pencils are a brand of plastic pencil.

4. Bamboo Slips were one of the main recording media of early China.

I usually don't translate the author's notes, but this one's fairly important information:

“The next chapter will be a little bit of a breather. It'll be a chapter about cooking, not really related to the main thread of the plot.”

Chapter 23: Cooking Tribulations

Here are some things that happened while I was still waiting for my soot pencils to dry out.

I've been struggling with this for a while, but I really want to do a few experiments to see if I can finally start eating Japanese food again. Originally, I was ready to blast this kitchen apart with all my modern knowledge, but when I let it loose, the result was less of a blast and more of a fizzle.

After all, it's fundamentally hopeless, right from the beginning. I really crave Japanese food, but there's no rice. No miso. No soy sauce. You can't buy mirin or other kinds of sake anywhere, of course. If I don't have the right seasonings, I don't think I've got any options. I can't think of anything I can actually make.

Well, you know, I actually do know how to make miso and soy sauce, right? If I've got the ingredients, I've got the knowhow. It's just soybeans and koji. I learned it in elementary school! We went on a field trip to a miso factory, and I actually paid a lot of attention to how they made it in the olden days.

But, where do I find soybeans or koji in this world? It's possible that I could substitute some other kind of bean for soybeans, but where can I actually buy koji? Of course, you can make koji from things that you can find in nature, but that's a really scary proposition. After all, koji is mold, right? If I mess up even a little bit, I'm going to drag every single member of my family into a nightmare of food poisoning. Even if I were to just happen across koji, then there's still the terrifying thought of trying to ferment something in this bacteria-infested place, plus it will put off enough of a stench that it'll get thrown out long before it's complete.

So, I gave up on making my own seasonings and started thinking long and hard about what kinds of Japanese food I could possibly make without any Japanese seasonings at all.

How about sashimi? We don't have any soy sauce, but if you eat it with

citrus fruit juice mixed with salt, that would still be tasty, right?

Although, this place doesn't seem to be close to the ocean. Even when I search through the town market, I can't find anyone selling fresh saltwater fish. There's no wakame or other kinds of seaweed for sale, either. Forget sashimi, I can't even make a seaweed salad.

So, if there's no seafood, there's obviously no kombu. No bonito flakes, either. I want to make Japanese food, but I can't even make dashi². This is a fatal blow.

Man, I'm not even going to ask for instant dashi... just, give me some kombu and bonito flakes, please?

There's these cucumber-like things that could be pickled, but I don't have soy sauce, my mother won't let me use any sugar, and I don't have any kind of vinegar to use except wine vinegar, so the taste is so wildly different that I can't be satisfied with it at all. I tried making it once, but it was so harshly sour that it was nothing at all like the pickles I was thinking of.

Vexed over my inability to do anything at all, I tried something very simple that even a child like me could do: I rubbed salt into slices of a pseudo-cucumber and ate it. The salt drew out a little bit of the moisture and made it just a little bit more tender, and it had the perfect amount of saltiness to remind me just a little of tsukemono³. I thought that I'd finally be satisfied once I'd tasted something remotely Japanese-y, but, on the contrary, it only made me cry for the white rice I so dearly miss. Incidentally, I tried putting the salted cucumber on the multigrain bread we have in the house, but that didn't work at all; they don't have particularly good affinity.

Rice! Rice! Japanese food! Someone, please! Give me some Japanese food!!

Thanks to those cucumbers, my cravings for Japanese food became so great that I thought I might try going to the river, catching some fish, and making something even vaguely Japanese. I can't use fire, so I don't have any alternatives but drying, so I decided to try drying out whatever fish I

could catch. If I brought along some salt, then I could salt the fish and let it dry, and that might even work. ...I really hoped it would work.

“Hey, Lutz,” I said. “I want to catch some fish. Can I do that in this river?”

“I don’t think you’d be able to.”

Just like he said, I was completely defeated. Fishing is, by itself, its own challenge.

As I sat there, dejected, Lutz caught some fish and brought them over to me.

“Look, I caught some, but what are you thinking of doing?”

“Can I have these?” “Yeah, sure, I don’t really need them.” “Lutz... are you able to make a fire? I want to try making ‘shioyaki’.”⁴

I can’t wait at all, so I try cooking the fish he brought me shioyaki-style, like I would sweetfish. Then, I took a bite.

...Foul! Bitter! Awful!

My face immediately scrunched up after just one bite. Strange, it was far less refined of a taste than I was expecting. What on earth could make it smell so awful? I didn’t think my grilling methods were wrong, so I tilted my head to the side, searching my memories to figure out what could have possibly happened. Lutz looked on with a frown.

“If you don’t cook it right,” he says, “it must really stink when you eat it like that, right?”

“.....Yeah, it stinks.”

This is a stinky fish. It would have been great if he told me that earlier.

Next, I pulled out my knife. It’s different both in form and function than a modern kitchen knife, and it’s a little bit worn, but that’s not going to have any effect on the flavor. I sharpened a stick and then speared the fish through, thinking I could actually make dried food like this. I left it alone for a while as I gathered firewood so the sun could dry it out. While I wasn’t paying attention, though, it suddenly became rock-hard and

inedible. It seems like, somehow, too much moisture evaporated.

“Maine... what is this?”

“...Fish that dried too much. Dried fish is supposed to be food, but you can't eat this at all.” “Yeah, I'll say. No matter how I look at it, that doesn't look like food at all.” “I might be able to make 'dashi' with this, though. I'm going to bring these home and try that out.”

This might have been inedible as dried food, but there was a chance I might be able to use it as a base for dashi. When I got home, carrying the withered husks of the fish, I tried my hand at making dashi.

“Maine, what are you doing?!” yelled my mother as soon as she saw what I was doing. “That's disgusting! Don't you dare put that thing in my pot!”

“Umm, Mommy, I want to try making 'dashi', though...” “Absolutely not! The only thing that goes in that pot is food.”

...It probably would have become food, though.

Thanks to the fact that my mother finds dried fish disgusting, my plans to make dashi have been strongly prohibited. Maybe it's because of the fact that she doesn't often see fish in her daily life that she seems to think that dried-out fish are disgusting. Even though she did look at a pig whose skull was split half open and say that it looked delicious...

I'm sorry, Mister Fish.

In conclusion: making Japanese food is impossible, at least for me. Without dashi and without seasonings, there isn't a single thing left for me to try. Once I give up on finding miso, soy sauce, or sake, there's basically no Japanese-style cooking left for me to try. I'm keenly aware of how fundamentally important these seasonings are.

For now, at least, I need to be thinking about what kind of foods I can make that, even if they're only tangentially Japanese, still have the kinds of flavors that you might find in Japan. Even that would be worthwhile. Yeah.

Then, somehow, a bird was delivered to my house. It seems like one of our neighbors managed to bring down five birds while in the forest. In this

season, it would be almost impossible for them to eat all of that before it spoiled, so they gave it to my father, repaying him for when he did that same for them a while ago.

The one to handle preparing this bird, whose name I don't even know, was my mother. The knife used to prepare the meat is very large, so not only I but even Tory can't handle it.

"Maine. Come here and pluck the feathers for me," she says. "O, okay..."

I grabbed hold of the bird as it lay limply on the table, then started pulling out its feathers. The disturbing sensation of the feathers pulling free sent shivers through me, giving me goosebumps. I told myself that I had no choice, and it's all for the sake of eating it, so I plucked the feathers, struggling not to cry. It looks like it'll be a long while before doing this sort of work becomes simple for me. However, when it came time to clean out the internal organs, I'm proud to say that I didn't faint, didn't run away, and was able to stay standing. I think I've grown a little, if I may say so myself.

"Now, Maine, we're ready to start cooking."

"Got it!"

After a lot of thought, I realized that I might be able to make a stock out of the leftover chicken carcass. If I have chicken carcass soup as a base, the number of things I can cook dramatically increases. I have neither kombu nor bonito flakes, but I wondered if I could make a usable stock if I substituted some other dried mushrooms for shiitake.

However, just making the soup was difficult. My mother had no idea what I wanted to do, and didn't help at all. It seemed she wanted to eat it grilled. I firmly insisted that it was my day to be the cook, however, and got her to give me the carcass and a few other large cuts of meat. After that, I was left to do everything myself.

I filled our biggest pot with water, then added the carcass, some breast meat, and some herbs one-by-one. Next, I started going through our vegetables, looking for things that have the right taste, smell, and texture even if they didn't have the right taste. I found that smelled like an onion,

something that tasted a little like ginger, something that smelled a bit like garlic, and some leaves that were kind of like bay leaves, and so on. In order to get rid of any foul smells the bird might give off, I started adding these things to the pot one by one.

“Maine, wait!!” cries my mother, suddenly. I freeze, knife in hand, holding the garlic-smelling plant on the cutting board by the leaves. “Huh?”

“That’s too much for you to handle. It’s brutal!”

I stared blankly down at the vegetable, which looked like an ordinary radish, but white. She rushed over to confiscate both the knife and the radish. Grasping it tightly by the leaves, she holds it firmly down on the cutting board, giving it a look like she’s daring it to run away. With a scowl, she chopped straight down, slicing the top cleanly off. At the same instant, I heard a sharp scream. From the radish.

“Uh? What?”

I blinked disbelievingly, convinced that I had to have misheard. My mother let go of the leaves, flipped the knife sideways, and smashed down on the radish with a loud bang, just like how you crush garlic. Crushing it like that took way less time than the fine-grained chopping I was planning on doing, so I thought she had saved me a lot of effort. When she lifted the knife, though, the white flesh of the radish had somehow turned red, almost like blood had spread over its surface. Scary.

“All set,” she says. “You can use this once you make sure to wash it properly.”

“...Okay.”

My mother’s expression seemed far more brutal than the radish was. I was just seeing things, right? Yeah. just seeing things. A trick of the eyes.

In this world, I occasionally see vegetables that resemble ones that I know from Earth, but there are lots of incomprehensibly strange foods here too. Whenever I run across a weird ingredient like this one, it only just reawakens the feelings that I’m no longer in the world I know.

Despite that little incident, I carefully skimmed the denatured fats off the top of the broth, taking with it the leaves that I used to soak up the bad flavors. I remember hearing that you're supposed to bring everything to a boil, drain off all the water, and then re-fill the pot clean water, but I've never had a soup that tasted bad because I didn't do that. I ignored that particularly bothersome step and just let it simmer over a low heat.

After I let it simmer for a while, I pulled out just the breast meat from the stock. I quickly quenched it in water, then pulled the tender meat apart into shreds. This will be delicious as a garnish on top of a salad.

As the soup simmered atop the stove, I worked on preparing the rest of the meat. I took the heart, the gizzard, and the other parts that go bad super easily and chopped them into chunks small enough to easily eat, then sprinkled salt and liquor on them. It's a simple way of baking these so you can more easily eat them. This is probably the kind of cooking that my family will be most easily able to understand. For an instant, the words "charcoal grill" flashed across my mind, but I had other ways to cook it so I gave up on the idea.

Our dinner was going to be organs and thigh meat. My mother slaved away over the thighs, cooking them like roast chicken, and prohibited me from interfering with that at all. I sprinkled salt and liquor on the breast meat, then put it aside in the winter preparation room so that I could use it in the next day's cooking. If I had a refrigerator or airtight plastic bags, I could make chicken ham, but, alas, I don't.

"...That smells pretty good!" says my mother. "The taste isn't quite there yet."

My mother had been avoiding the stock pot as if it she thought it contained something unpleasant, but the scent of soup that started wafting through the air made her come a little closer to investigate. There was nothing left to do on the soup but let it simmer and carefully skim off the fat, so I started finely chopping some of the vegetables. Thanks to this body, everything I want to do takes a tremendous amount of time, so it's best if I start on my next steps early.

My first experiment in my plan to eat Japanese-y food was nabe.⁵ After all, I thought, if you have dashi, you can make nabe, right? I don't have access the dashi that I'm familiar with, but I had chicken soup. I have neither ponzu⁶ nor sesame sauce, so I decided to cook pomay (the fruit that looks like a yellow pepper but tastes like a tomato) and some herbs into the broth make it into something like a tomato nabe.

I took the wingtips, which my mother says are hard to actually use because they're so bony, and added them to the pot. While they cooked, I chopped up some various seasonable vegetables, none of which I know the name for, into the right size for serving. When these are all cooked together in the broth, they'll be quite delicious. That's nabe's true charm, I think.

"Ah," I said, "That looks about ready." I set a strainer on top of our second-biggest pot. "Mommy, could you help me, please?"

"What do you need me to do?" "I want to pour all of the soup in here to strain it, so that I can get out the parts I don't want in it." "...Right," she said, looking a little bit relieved, "there's no way we were going to eat that, after all."

She poured out the chicken carcass soup into the strainer. I washed out the first pot, then had her pour the filtered soup back in there. Our second-biggest pot is the most-used pot in the house, so using that to keep soup stock would be a huge hindrance. Even my next few steps in making pomay nabe needed that pot.

I added some chopped, dried mushrooms to the finished soup stock, then got to work on making the pomay nabe. I carefully pulled the edible meat off of the boiled carcass and wingtips that we strained out of the soup, taking care to avoid stabbing myself on all of the tiny bones in the meat.

Based on the delicious scent of my mother's roast chicken that drifted through the room, and the amount of time I think it's been since we started, I thought it was just about time for me to put the finishing touches on the nabe.

“Maine! What are you doing?!”

“Putting... the vegetables in?” “You have to boil those first!”

Generally speaking, when my mother cooks vegetables she boils them until they're limp to make them less bitter, then drains the water and uses just the boiled vegetables in the dish. This, however, gets rid of half the flavor and quite a bit of the nutritional value. I can't really complain about my mother's cooking, but when it comes to my own recipes, being forced to do things my mother's way would be a problem.

“For this kind of cooking it's okay,” I explain. “Aren't you going to ruin that tasty-looking soup that you've worked so hard to make?”

“It'll be fine!”

I boiled everything together while skimming off the fat, until finally the pomay nabe was complete. I gave it a little taste, and it was great. Even without boiling the vegetables first, everything turned out fine. Yep!

“I'm home!” said Tory as she walked through the door. “A~ah! It was coming from here!”

“Hi, Tory! What was coming from where?” “I could smell this amazing smell from all the way down the main street! I got really hungry just smelling it as I walked. All the people I was passing were trying to find where it was coming from. I didn't think it was coming from here!”

Is it like how you suddenly get hungry when you pass by a Chinese restaurant or a ramen shop? This chicken carcass soup has a really powerful aroma.

“I'm home,” said my father, returning home from the day shift. “Oh! That was my house I was smelling!”

It seemed like the scent of my chicken soup reached far and wide. My family gathered at the table, faces gleaming with anticipation. They all came together just in time for their dinner.

“This is made from a bird that Al dropped by to give us earlier today,” explains my mother. “He's returning the favor from when you shared

some of your hunting earlier. Maine and I cooked it up.”

“So, this unusual recipe is Maine’s, then?” “That’s right.”

In the center of the table, my mother placed her roast chicken legs. Next to that is a salad, garnished with pulled chicken breast meat. Near my father, I put the salted, baked organ meats out as snacks, and I lined up bowls of pomay nabe for everyone. When it’s all split out like this, though, it’s not really nabe. It’s more like an ordinary pomay soup.

“What’s this?” asks Tory. “It smells really good. Can I eat it?”

“It’s pomay soup,” I reply. “I did my best making soup from the bird, so I think it’s going to be delicious. Try it!”

As I talked, Tory brought her face really close to her bowl of soup, eyes glittering, then grabbed her spoon and had a taste.

“Whoa, delicious! How?! This is really delicious.” My mother tried a mouthful. “Oh my, it is!” she said, sincerely. “I’m really surprised. You were stewing bird bones and you didn’t cook the vegetables first, but it still turned out this well.”

It looked like she’d had a knot of anxiety within her about whether it was going to be delicious, since she knew what went into making it.

“Amazing, Maine!” said my father, attacking his food with zeal. “You’ve got a real talent for cooking.”

I tried a spoonful myself. The chicken stock had a very good flavor, splendidly bringing out the umami of the vegetables. Delicious.

Delicious, but not Japanese food.

The next day, I finished gathering firewood in the forest quickly and headed home. The younger kids have to come and go at specific times, but Tory, who’s already been baptized, seems to be able to come and go freely without having to ask permission. I went back early with her.

Since I wanted to use the leftover chicken meat, Tory wasn’t the only cook for the day. For round two of my plan to try to eat Japanese food, I wanted to make poultry sakamushi.⁷ I thought that even though I don’t

have sake, it might have a similar feel to it if I use another type of alcohol.

“You said you want to use the leftover chicken, do you know what you want to make already?”

“Yeah, I want to make 'sakamushi' out of bird meat, 'gnocchi', and a salad. How does that sound?” “Umm... I don't really understand, but I'll leave it to you.”

First up was the gnocchi. I boiled some tubers, mashed them, and mixed them with multigrain flour and a little bit of salt. Commoners don't have the budgetary freedom to use wheat flour as much as they want, so we use mixed-grain flour instead. It's a combination of rye, barley, and oats. I mixed it into a dough that's about as firm as my earlobe, rolled it out into a long tube, and started cutting it into one-centimeter pieces.

“If you don't mind,” I asked, “could you take these things that I'm cutting out and flatten them out like this?” With a bit of difficulty, I use the back of a fork to spread out and flatten a chunk of dough. “Got it,” she said, with a big nod.

Spreading out the dough with a fork leaves ridges, so when it's rolled into a finger shape, it holds sauce very easily. One by one, Tory stretched out each piece of dough that I cut off. Since she has more strength than I do, every piece I cut off is stretched into the right shape in no time.

“Tory, you're way better at this than me.”

“Really? ...Maine, don't look at me, you just keep cutting. I'll run out if you don't, you know?”

I have Tory fill up a pot with water, put everything in, and bring it to a roiling boil. When they started floating to the top of the pot, they were finished. I took the leftover pomay soup from last night, add more pomay to it, and stew it until it's reduced to a thick sauce. Right before it's time to eat, I'll mix the gnocchi with this sauce, but that's about all I can do on this for now.

“That's all for now, right? The salad comes together really quickly, too...”

“Mom will be home soon, so it's okay if we start the salad now, right?”

As Tory and I made the salad, our mother came home. As soon as I saw her come in, I went to the winter preparation room to fetch the breast meat I set aside yesterday so that I could start on the sakamushi. I'd left the meat in a room that's always cool, on a rock that was cool to the touch, but in this warm season, I was scared of it spoiling. Cautiously, I sniffed the meat.

...Alright, it didn't spoil. This is fine.

"Maine, will this pot do?"

"Yeah! Thanks, Tory. Since I seasoned this with salt and alcohol yesterday, we can get started immediately."

Since we don't have any pepper to use as a seasoning, I had no choice but to give up on making it spicy. The actual recipe is very simple. You season the breast meat with salt and alcohol, lightly grill just the surface, then put it in a pot with more alcohol and cover the lid to let it steam.

I thought that I should add the mushrooms I worked hard to gather up in the forest, to help bring out the flavor. I washed them clean, then lined them up on the cutting board. As I lifted my knife, Tory's eyes snapped up.

"Maine, stop! If you don't put those in the fire first, they'll dance!"

"Huh?"

No sooner than she had said that, she'd already started skewering the mushrooms from their base through the cap. Then, she sprinkled them lightly with salt and stuck them in the fire.

Dance? The mushrooms would? Like... how bonito flakes flutter in drifting steam? I did not understand what she said at all.

I doubtfully tilted my head to one side, trying to figure out what she meant. Tory pulled the lightly-toasted mushrooms from the fire, turned, and handed them back to me.

"Now they're okay," she says. "Th... thanks...?"

I decided that it was a strange turn of phrase, but if Tory said it was okay to use them now, then it must be okay. It's just one more strange foodstuff

on the pile: a mushroom that requires extra care in preparation. I cut them up, taking care not to burn myself on the hot mushrooms.

“Mommy, can I use this alcohol for cooking? It won’t taste good if I don’t use enough of it, so I need about half a cupful.”

“Alright, here you go,” she says filling it halfway full.

I took the cup from her, then climbed up on a stool, stretching up on tiptoes to pour it into the iron pot. It hissed as it hit the hot metal, and I quickly covered the pot with a lid. When I heard it start to bubble, I removed it from the fire, cooking the chicken with just the heat still trapped in the metal of the pot.

“You’re taking it off already?”

“Yeah. I’m going to cook the meat for another ten minutes just using the heat in the pot. If I cook breast meat over a fire for too long, it’ll get all dry and hard to eat.”

I heated the pomay sauce I made from the leftover soup and the fresh gnocchi, then mix them together. Tory’s salad was finished as well. Just like the previous day’s dinner, we used shredded breast meat as a topping. I’m very pleased with how that meat turned out.

“Today’s dinner looks great too!”

“We’ll have to be sure to thank Al.”

Given the state of our budget, seeing so much food lined up on the table like that is a rare sight indeed. It’s a big deal to give someone a bird like that.

“I’m home,” said my father, walking through the door with a big smile on his face and high expectations for dinner. “Another delicious looking meal today!”

He told us about how much he was bragging about last night’s meal to his coworkers at the gate. I hoped that his overly-doting-father filter was making him massively exaggerate. I’d be much happier if it was all in his head. If it wasn’t, it’s going to make it a bit harder for me to go to the

gates.

“Let’s dig in!”

“Whoa, amazing! This is delicious, Maine!”

Tory’s eyes went wide as she took a bite of sliced-up poultry sakamushi. As soon as my mother had one mouthful, she smiled brilliantly.

“It’s so simple to make, but this breast meat is so wonderfully tender. The flavor of the mushrooms has baked into it as well, it’s really delicious. Is it because we used good liquor, I wonder?”

“I think so. The whole dish brings out the depth of flavor of the honey wine.”

As soon as I said that, my father’s face went pale, and he dropped his fork with a clunk. He stood up and woodenly walked to the shelves, picking up the earthenware pot in which we store the alcohol. When he saw how much was missing from the small pot, his head suddenly dropped, and he looked like he was moments away from bursting into tears.

“...M, my precious alcohol got...”

Sorry, sorry. I mean, when I asked my mother for some alcohol, she said that it was something that he’d gone off and bought in secret, and that it would be such a shame if all of us couldn’t enjoy how delicious it was. She had a bit of a wicked smile on her face when she said that, and I thought it would be best to just follow along through that unusual occurrence.

Since it was honey wine that I used, it had a different sort of sweetness than it would have if I’d used real sake, so once again it wasn’t really much like Japanese food. It was another completely different thing.

Aaah, I really want Japanese food...

Although words like “dance”, “struggle”, and “danger” come up when talking about some of the ingredients here, it looks like I’m able to adapt the kinds of cooking that I’m familiar to this new world without any problems. On other days, I made a tuber-based gratin, a pseudo-risotto out

of a grain kind of like buckwheat, and a quiche made on top of the stiff dough of the multigrain bread, all of which were well-received.

My family may like everything I make, but as for me, I can't stand this at all. Even if I'm making Western-style food, we don't have any spices or seasonings, and I'm starting to get very tired of the same sorts of flavors over and over again.

At the very least, give me pepper! I'd be overjoyed with curry powder!

There are still many tribulations ahead in my quest to better my culinary life.

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Translator's notes for this chapter:

For the most part, I've left food and ingredient names untranslated unless there's a well-established English equivalent, as is usually done when talking about Japanese cooking. I've tried to phrase things so that things are as obvious as possible in context, but there are a few things that require basically immediate explanation.

1. Koji is a fermentation starter made of various molds, yeasts, and bacteria.
2. Dashi is a cooking stock made of kombu and bonito flakes.
3. Tsukemono are pickled vegetables, usually served as a side dish.
4. Shioyaki is a grilling method, particularly for fish, involving large quantities of salt and a very hot fire.
5. Nabe refers to several kinds of Japanese hot pots. The name is short for "nabemono", which is literally just "things in a pot".
6. Ponzu is a citrusy sauce used in a lot of Japanese cuisine.
7. Sakamushi is food (usually seafood) that's been steamed in sake.

Chapter 24: The Road to the Meeting

After the bamboo exploded in the stove, I slip back into feverish nightmare, clutching my last remaining bamboo stick as I writhe in pain.

I don't care about anything anymore. I no longer have the willpower to fight back.

My mother burned my mokkan, When she burned the bamboo that Lutz had brought so I could make bamboo writing strips, though, I couldn't summon up any of that anger.

If only I was healthy. If only I was a strong, fit adult.

If I were an adult, I could have skipped over papyrus, clay tablets, and mokkan, and gone straight to making rice paper. At least, if I was as strong as Tory and Lutz, strong and fit enough to do real work, I could at least try. With this frail body and these weak child's hands, I can't cut up the wood I'd need in order to make real paper.

If I could just wait until I grew up, then maybe I could finally find my answer. But that's so, so far away. And still, even though I'm talking about growing up, will I really grow as much as everyone else? Hobbled by my lack of strength, will I really grow?

I can't even hope for that.

If everything is truly pointless, isn't it okay for me to just surrender to this fever that rages within me? In a place where I can't get a single book, is my fight to constantly endure living in this filthy, difficult world really worth it?

Maybe it's okay to just disappear.

It was a fleeting, accidental thought, but the fever surged forth anyway, sucking me deeper and deeper. A feeling spreads through me, a vague desire to just stop thinking, to let the fever swallow me whole.

I have only one regret. I won't be able to apologize to Lutz.

I won't be able to apologize for the fact that I couldn't use any of the

bamboo, despite how hard he'd worked to find a nonflammable material I could use. The words he said to me when he'd left to go get me some bamboo drift through my mind.

"This is just so you'll introduce me to Otto! I'm paying you in advance, so you'd better get healthy! Got it?!"

I haven't fulfilled that promise. Even though he'd put in so much work for the sake of that promise, is it okay for me to just pretend it never happened and run away into the depths of this fever?

Lutz did pay me in advance. It would be so simple to just fade away in this fever, but he gave me those bamboo strips, so I have to get better. I have to introduce him to Otto.

I tell myself that it's for Lutz's sake, and try to push the fever back down. I'd much rather keep my promise than be eaten alive. I need to put my affairs in order. I don't have time for thoughts like the one that flitted through my mind just a little while ago.

That's right, when I died in that earthquake, I wasn't ready for that at a... aaaaaaAAA! What happened to all those things I'd never gotten around to doing! NOOOOOO! I don't want this, I don't want this! This is awful! I can't just die here!

All the regrets from my previous life that I'd thought I'd already buried come clearly flashing through my mind. "Even though I died, dying is too much!" I cry, leaping to my feet. Somehow, the fever's been crammed back into a tiny little ball.

I shoved my last life's regrets back into the corner of my mind, and once again resolved not to think about them anymore. Now that I've finally been allowed to leave the house and accompany my father to the gates, I head to the duty room to meet Otto.

"Excuse me, Mister Otto, I asked you a favor, but then I got really sick..."

That's right: while I was laid out with fever, Otto's day off came and went, so he and Lutz weren't able to meet like I had promised.

"Squad Leader told me about how you were sick for five entire days. Are

you alright?”

“Yeah!” I say, smiling. “Thanks to everyone.” Otto frowns slightly, staring closely at my face. “Are you really okay? Your color’s quite off.”

The fact that I’m looking kind of pale is actually not the fever’s fault. Rather, it’s because it seems unlikely that I’ll be able to make any paper.

“Aaah~, it’s because there’s something really troubling me that I can’t figure out how to solve. ...Mister Otto, can I ask what you’d do in my place?”

“Huh? You want to ask what I’d do if I had your problem?”

He glances at me briefly, his eyes round. Otto, during his time as a trader, must have accumulated so many experiences that I can’t even imagine. There’s a chance he might be able to think of something that I couldn’t.

“Yeah. There’s a thing that I really want right now, but since I’m not healthy and not strong, I can’t make it myself. When I grow up, I think I’d be able to make it, but since my body’s like this, I don’t know if I’m going to be a healthy adult either, or if I’m even going to grow up as much as everyone else. Also, I really can’t wait all that time. Mister Otto, what would you do if you were me?”

Otto nods along as he listens to my explanation. When I finish, he answers immediately, like he hardly needed to think about it at all.

“If you can’t make it yourself,” he says, raising his eyebrows a bit, “why don’t you hire someone who can? Is that all that’s bothering you?”

“Ah?!”

The scales have fallen from my eyes. I’d never even considered the concept of hiring someone to get me the things I wanted. As expected of a trader. I wonder why, though. I was certainly aware of the concept that I could be hired by someone, but it had never crossed my mind that someone could be hired by me.

“...That’s an amazing idea, but I don’t have the money for that.”

“Well, if waiting until you do isn’t possible, then... Hm. If it were me, I’d find someone who could do it, then subtly lead them along until they offered to do it of their own free will. It’s not an easy thing to do, but if they do it without you directly asking, it won’t hurt your budget at all.”

He truly is a former merchant. His explanation is so eloquent, and his smile so genuine, but he’s brilliantly wicked. I must have been happily lead along like that too, huh? My calculation abilities are quite high, but wasn’t I saying that it seemed really easy on the budget to hire an assistant on a salary of slate pencils?

“.....I’ll follow your example.”

Taking someone who looks like they could do something, then leading them along until they do it on their own initiative... is it? That seems like it would be really difficult for someone like me.

As I stew in my thoughts, Otto pats me on the shoulder and hands me my slate. He’s clearly telling me that the conversation’s over and that I should get to quietly studying.

“Ah, that’s right! Maine, since you’re feeling better, how about we meet the day after tomorrow, on my day off? We could meet at, hmm... the central plaza would do nicely. How about we meet there around the third bell?”

“I was just thinking about asking you. Thank you so much!”

Out of habit, I jot down a memo in the corner of my slate, reminding myself that we’re meeting after the third bell. When I look back up, Otto is lightly rubbing his chin, smiling so widely that his eyes crinkle. For some reason, that smile sends a chill down my spine, like I’m looking at something dangerous. I reflexively straighten up in my seat and fix my gaze on him.

“Ahh, if it’s someone you’re personally introducing to me, he’s got to be an interesting child. I’m looking forward to an enjoyable day off!”

Did he just say “don’t bring someone boring, because it will ruin my precious day off”, or was it my imagination? Huh? I thought this was going

to be a casual meeting so that he could talk about what it was like as a trader, right?

I cover up the sudden turbulence in my heart with a big smile and a nod, then I let my gaze drop down to my slate. I've broken out in something of a cold sweat.

This isn't good. I barely have any time before this meeting, and I don't even know what it's really about!

I grind my teeth with worry over how little time I have to prepare. We're meeting the day after tomorrow, so I really have no time. I can't ask, either; since I'm the one who is doing the introductions, I can't really say that I have no clue what the meeting is really for. As I diligently practice my vocabulary, my pencil clacking against the slate, I frantically try to think of what the meeting could possibly mean.

"Maine, we're heading home already."

"Daddy!"

It's rather early for us to be heading home, but when he calls for me I gather up my things and leave the duty room.

"Hey, Daddy. I told Mister Otto that I wanted to introduce him to Lutz, but what does an introduction like that mean?"

"Lutz would be looking around for an apprenticeship at about this time, right? I think that he'd do well to follow his older brothers into their line of work, but does he want to become a merchant?"

A job referral?! No, no, it's not supposed to be that heavy! I mean, a child like me can't possibly be part of anyone's network.

"He just said he wanted to ask some questions..."

"Right, so there's no doubt about it, he wanted a referral so he could ask about an apprenticeship. Your friend seems rather relentless."

"Relentless?" "Of course. When we talk about hiring an apprentice, we're talking about looking after someone for a very long period of time. Even when you're fully independent, that's the kind of bond that can't ever be

completely broken.”

This is far more serious than I thought. Lutz is not just looking to ask some questions. It seems that, since he wants to become a trader, he wants Otto, a former trader, to introduce him to somebody.

Aaah, so in other words, the meeting the day after tomorrow is basically a job interview?! How did I have no idea this was going to be such an important meeting?!

After we returned home, I asked my mother and father about apprenticeships in detail. The next day, I load my basket full of cargo before I head to the forest, now fully aware of how serious this meeting is going to be. On our way to the forest, I explain to Lutz about the sad fate of the bamboo strips, and let him know that the meeting with Otto was going to be tomorrow. He sighed when I told him about the bamboo, saying that it's definitely possible to mistake bamboo for vanihitz, and when I told him about the meeting he thanked me with honest delight.

When we reach the forest, everybody scatters to go about their gathering work. I, however, grab Lutz's hand, and drag him over to the river.

“Now then, Lutz. This is a good spot, so let's make sure you're nice and clean all over.”

“Huh?”

Otto, because he was once a merchant, keeps a very tidy appearance. I think that it's best for Lutz to give the best possible impression that he can on his first meeting. Since I help Otto with his job so frequently, I am well aware of how calculating he is, just like a merchant. If I were in Lutz's shoes, I would want to show up to this meeting looking absolutely flawless. If he were to judge Lutz as without merit on their very first meeting, there's no way he'd even refer Lutz to a shopkeeper, let alone a trader.

“When you're meeting people for the first time, first impressions are really important! Since we have time to prepare, it's a really good idea to make sure we do everything right. If I were to judge you right now, based on what you look like, I wouldn't think very well of you.”

“Even if I wash up, though, I don’t think much is going to change.”

It would be stellar if Lutz could borrow the nice clothes Ralph wore to his baptism, but I don’t know if Ralph lend them to him. Neither Lutz nor I have much in the way of clothing, so there’s not much we can do but wear our usual stuff, but if there’s anything that we can improve, I want to improve it. Despite his stubbornness, I take out my simple all-in-one shampoo and get ready start working on his hair, explaining to him about how much of an effect one’s appearance has on other people. I intend to polish him until he shines, so I lugged a bucket, some cloth, and a comb out with me to the forest. I don’t intend to just wash his hair, though; I want his whole body clean.

I fill the bucket with water from the river and my simple shampoo, then I wash it through Lutz’s hair over and over, like I usually do with Tory’s. I keep talking with Lutz as I work, somehow feeling like some kind of hairdresser.

“So, Lutz. When you said you wanted to hear about being a trader, you really meant you wanted to be a trader, right? And since you want to be a trader, you wanted to be introduced to one?”

“Hm? Yeah.”

I dry off his blonde hair with a cloth, which is now much glossier. It’s such a beautiful color of gold that I wouldn’t mind having it myself. As I comb it out, it only gets more radiant. Holding back my little bit of envy, I keep asking him questions.

“So, Lutz, when you become a trader, what do you want to do? Just travel around?”

“What’s up with you all of a sudden?” “You have to think carefully about it!” “Why?” “Mister Otto doesn’t know anything about you. You’re not being introduced by your parents or a relative who knows you super well, so you’re going to have to think of all of these answers yourself.”

From what my parents were telling me yesterday, it seems like in this town a child’s parents do the introductions when the child starts doing an internship. For that reason, a child’s job winds up being somehow related

to one of their parents' jobs. For example, my mother works as a dyer, so she introduced Tory to one of her friends from work, and got her an apprenticeship as a seamstress.

When a child has the same profession as their parent, they don't tend to work at the same place, since it would be too easy for them to start relying on their parents too much. However, if the child enters a related profession, then their parents can rest easy knowing that their child is being supervised by someone they know, and the children work seriously because they know their parents will be hearing about it. It's rare for a child like Lutz to want to work in a profession their parents are opposed to, and rarer still for them to be introduced by someone outside the family.

"Mister Otto is being really gracious in meeting you tomorrow, but it's not because he's super nice! He used to be a merchant, so he's a person who thinks of everything in terms of profit and loss. If you show up without having thought any of this through, he's not going to meet you a second time, I don't think."

Tomorrow's meeting is a job interview. For an interview, you need to make sure your appearance is in order and that you know both what you want out of the job and what you think you can bring to it. If you don't, there's a good chance you won't be taken seriously.

"...How about you, Maine?"

"Huh?" "If someone were to ask you why you wanted to be a merchant, could you tell them immediately?"

Lutz scowls at me with pursed lips, perhaps because he couldn't come up with his own answer immediately.

"Yeah. I want to sell paper. If I can be a merchant's apprentice, then I could find someone to teach how to make paper, then I could have them make it for me."

It's all for my sake, because I want books. Until now, I've been thinking that I shouldn't be relying on others, and I should do whatever I can to make something that I could reasonably substitute for books. However, at this point I am quite frankly at my limit. Now, what I want is for someone

who can do all the labor, from beginning to end, while all I do is provide the knowledge. If I turn over the profits I'd ordinarily get for that information, I think I could find someone out there who would make it for me.

"Paper? I thought you wanted books, though?"

"You need paper if you want to make a book. And, you know, I don't think there's anyone else around here besides me who really wants books." "If you're the only person who wants to buy books, then you're not going to be able to sell any, right?" he says, shocked. I nod, with a big smile. "Yeah! Selling books isn't going to be that easy, I don't think. However, paper... I think I can make it for cheaper than parchment, so I think I'd be able to sell it. At the very least, I think there might be a merchant out there who would take me on once I showed him how to make it." "...Huh. You've really thought this through, Maine. I'll have to think about it too." "Since you're only Mister Otto's assistant's friend, it'll be really easy for him to turn you down. If you can clearly say what you want to do with yourself, though, and you can make them believe that it'll be profitable for them, then won't there be a merchant out there who'd take you on?"

While Lutz sits, deep in thought, scowling at the surface of the river, I use the time to wash up the rest of his body. We don't have the time to sit here and do nothing while we think.

Well before the third bell sounds, Lutz and I arrive at the town square, me looking like I always do and Lutz looking far nicer than usual. I had been hoping that Ralph would lend Lutz his nice clothing, but it seems that Ralph didn't want them to get dirty and refused.

"Hey, we're meeting at the third bell, right? Aren't we way too early?"

"That's okay! Being late would be absolutely fatal. Once we get there, we can sit and talk for a while, and it'll be time for the meeting before you know it."

The temple rings its bell regularly, in intervals of somewhere between two and three hours. I'm sure that being late to a meeting in a world

without actual timepieces isn't as bad as I made it sound, but I want to avoid any sort of negative impression from having the two of us be late to a meeting we requested.

"That reminds me, yesterday, my mom was all, 'what did you do to your hair?', and she made a really big deal about it!"

With a deplorable look on his face, he tugs at a lock of his glossy blond hair. I understand exactly what his mother was thinking. If my son suddenly had smooth, shiny hair after a day out, I'd be curious too.

"Beauty is always the thing a woman is most fascinated by, after all."

"I told her you did it, so she should ask you if she wants to know."
"What?!"

I shrink back suddenly, my voice crying out in incredulity, a headache instantly forming as I realize that I'll never be free of Carla's unceasing barrage of questions once she gets a hold of me.

"I'll tell her how to make it so she can do it herself. I don't have very much of it anymore."

"...Ah, sorry. If it's that bad, you didn't need to use it on me, you know?"
"That's okay. You're always the one helping me out, after all."

I don't mind using some of my simple shampoo on Lutz at all, since he's been constantly assisting me, but I absolutely would mind giving it to Carla. After all, I'm already having to suffer with the fact that I can only wash my hair with shampoo once out of every five days and have to use plain water on the rest.

"But, still..."

"If it really bothers you, I wouldn't mind if you helped me make some more. I'm way too weak, so I'm not very good at pressing oil." "What, is that it?"

As we talk, Otto comes into view near the entrance to the plaza. When he sees the two of us, he smiles broadly, but even from this far away I immediately realize what just happened.

Ahh, this really was a test.

Given that he gave such a fuzzy time as “around the third bell” while giving me that dangerous smile that put me so on edge, this really must have been a test to see whether or not we’d arrive well before the bell actually rang. Otto purses his lips just a little, then turns towards another part of the plaza and gives a big wave. Another man comes into view, and the two of them start walking towards us. Beads of cold sweat trickle down my spine, and I unconsciously grip Lutz’s hand tightly.

“They’re here, Lutz. Remember, introduce yourself first.”

“R... right.”

Judging from how the two of them are talking quietly to each other as they approach, I know that this is Otto’s friend, a merchant. He briefly glances at me, and I meet his eyes. They gleam with a sharp light, and I feel like my value is being appraised.

Nobody told me that Otto wasn’t going to be the only interviewer! Aargh, it’s Lutz’s interview, but I’m the one getting super stressed, here!

Chapter 25: Meeting With the Merchant

Their clothing design is strange... no, their clothing design isn't what I'm used to seeing. The many layers of fabric draped over them show no signs of either stains or patches at all. This is not something I see very often at all in my daily life, where it's only natural to use the barest minimum of cloth and thread at all times. Based solely on his clothes, I imagine that Otto's friend is someone who makes quite a bit of money. His garments, his demeanor, that calculating look in his eyes, everything about him is vastly different than the shopkeepers I see in the town market.

When I say he looks like a merchant who makes a lot of money, I do not mean that it seems like he's the owner of an old, well-established shop. Rather, he moves with the force of the president of a venture firm in the middle of a tremendous rise. At first glance, he has curly, pale, milk-tea colored hair and gentle-looking features, but his red eyes overflow with self-confidence, and they glitter with the raw ferocity of a carnivorous beast.

"Hey there, Maine!" says Otto. "And you must be Lutz?"

"Good morning, Mister Otto. Yes, this is my friend Lutz. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today."

I'm not entirely sure what the most suitable way to greet him is, so I tap my chest with my fist twice in a salute, like I always do. Otto returns the salute, so I think that I didn't at least make a big mistake.

"Good morning, sirs, my name is Lutz. It is nice to meet you."

Lutz seems very nervous, but he refuses to give in to the intimidation of their discerning stares, and he recites the unfamiliar greeting without stammering and without a quiver in his voice. The first hurdle has been cleared.

"Benno," says Otto, "this is Maine, the girl who works as my assistant. She's my squad leader's daughter. Maine, this is Benno, an acquaintance from when I worked as a trader."

“Mister Benno, sir,” I say, “My name is Maine. It is nice to meet you.”

Despite the fact that I compulsively want to bow as I introduce myself, I don’t forget that it’s not customary in this culture to do so, and instead give him my best smile.

“You’re quite polite!” says Benno. “I am Benno, nice to meet you.” He looks over to Otto. “...She’s quite well-mannered for such a small child.”

“She’s not as young as she looks,” he clarifies. “She’s six years old.”

I probably look somewhere between three and four years old. Benno frowns slightly, then the corners of his mouth turn up in amusement as he glances over at Otto.

“...Your assistant’s a girl who hasn’t even been baptized?”

“Ahh, well, how should I put this. I’m teaching her to read and write so that she can become my assistant in the future.” “I thought you said before that she was already working as your assistant, did you not?” “... Don’t worry about it too much.”

As they banter harmlessly back and forth, I notice that there’s a lot of information being conveyed purely through subtext. Chills run down my spine. Are Lutz and I even capable of handling an interview with these people? What the hell. When he brought up that I haven’t been baptized yet, I got the keen feeling that he was intimating that I wasn’t actually capable of doing the work, and that Otto was simply going easy on me.

With a dubious expression on his face, he stares at a spot just above my eyes for a little bit, then opens his mouth to speak.

“I’m very curious about something that I’d like to ask about first, is that alright?”

“Yes, sir, what is it?” “What’s that rod you have in your hair?”

I see. Asking such a silly question after rejecting me would be hard, wouldn’t it? Is this man perhaps already intending to dismiss me?

Forcing a smile onto my face, I quickly undo my hairpin and hand it over to him as he carefully studies me, seeming to get a lot of information out

of every little move I make.

“This is a ‘hairpin’. I use it to keep my hair in place.”

Otto seems to be curious as well, so they study my hairpin closely, looking it up and down, turning it around, and giving it careful scrutiny.

It’s just a stick, you know? There’s no gimmick or trick to it, you know?

“...It’s just a stick, huh.”

“Yes, it’s a stick that I had my father whittle for me.” “And you’re able to keep your hair in place with just this?” “Yes, sir.”

I take the hairpin back from him, then put my hair back up into its usual style. I gather up the half-up part of my hair, twist it around the hairpin, spin it until it’s tight, then with a quick jerk fix everything in place. It’s something I do every day, so I’m very practiced at doing it.

“Ohhhh... impressive!”

Lutz and Otto stare at me with wide eyes. This is the first time they’ve seen me as I put up my hair like this. Benno touches my hair, frowning slightly.

“Say, Maine. Your hair’s pretty impressive too. What do you put in it?”

His touch may be careful as he studies my hair, but the discerning gleam in his eyes is breathtakingly sharp. Between the glitter of profit in his eyes and the ferocity of the women’s questions back on baptism day, I can clearly see that my simple shampoo could be quite the valued commodity.

“It’s a combination of relatively common things, but the details are my secret.”

“Boy, you use the same thing?” “Maine insisted on making my hair look nice yesterday...”

Ah, Mister Benno, did I hear your tongue click just now? Did you think that it would be easy to get us to teach you how it’s made, since we’re merely children? How unfortunate. I’m not going to play my high-value cards in a little skirmish like that; Lutz’s interview hasn’t even started yet.

Benno and I exchange smiles, mine sweet, his stiff. Otto lets out a little sigh, running his fingers back through his hair.

“Well then, Lutz. You said that you wanted to become a trader?”

The main question has arrived. Next to me, I hear Lutz’s breath catch as he gulps nervously. I sneakily reach over and squeeze his hand reassuringly, quietly cheering him on.

You’ve thought about this long and hard since last night, right? Now is the time to stand tall, Lutz! Tell us of your ambitions, and seize your victory!

“Ah, yes. I w—”

“Give it up.” “Eh?”

Lutz was stopped before he could even start telling us what he wanted. In my heart, I scream. He worked so hard to come up with that answer, at least hear him out! Otto, however, looks like he’s swallowed a bug as he looks down at Lutz.

“Only an idiot would throw away his citizenship like that.”

“...Mister Otto, what do you mean by citizenship?”

The question slips out of my mouth before I even have time to think about it. This is the first time I’ve heard that word used here. I know that citizenship, in this context, would be the set of basic rights afforded to those who live in this city. Just like how you can still enjoy the rights granted to you by the Japanese constitution even if you haven’t studied them, there seem to be certain obvious rights granted to the citizens of this town. However, I have absolutely no idea what they could be.

“It means the right to live in the city. It’s also something that records your identity. When you turn seven and go to the temple to be baptized, your name will be registered, letting you work in the city, get married here, rent a house, and so on. The ways you can interact with the city are vastly different when you do or do not have citizenship. Outsiders can register at the temple, be granted citizenship, and settle down here, but doing so is ludicrously expensive.”

“Mister Otto, did you have to pay?” He nods. “Yes, that’s right,” he says, smiling bitterly, perhaps in recollection. Benno, next to him, points at Otto and laughs. “This guy sold everything he had so that he could stay here and marry Corinna!” “I wanted to open up a shop here and continue selling things here if I could, but buying citizenship was an enormous effort that left me nearly broke.”

I don’t know how much money the average trader has saved up, but it looks like it’s not enough to cover buying citizenship, paying for a wedding, and opening a shop.

“On top of that, a life on the road is vastly different compared to living in a town. Tell me, Lutz, do you have any idea what it means to live your life while riding on the back of a cart?”

“...No,” he replies, slowly shaking his head.

It takes only two hours to walk across this town from end to end, so children in this town move around almost exclusively by walking. Lutz might have ridden in a hand-drawn wagon before, but he’s probably never ridden in a horse-drawn cart before, and most likely has no idea at all what it’s like to actually travel by cart.

“Let’s take water, for example. When you need it right now, where do you get it?”

“From the well.” “Of course, right? But when you’re on the road, there aren’t any nice wells that are built for you. You’d have to start searching for places you can find water.” “There’s rivers...”

When we go to the forest, we use the river as a source of water, so that’s the first thing that pops into Lutz’s head. However, when you’re on the road, you aren’t at all guaranteed to be traveling near a river. Plus, since paper is so expensive and hard to get, how many traders actually have maps to go by?

“Lutz,” I say, “when you’re just starting out as a trader, you’re not going to know where those rivers are. There’s no way you’ll be able to follow the rivers all the time...”

“It’s just like she says. That’s why traders generally travel the same routes all the time. When you do, you make friends and contacts in the towns you visit, you can deal in information, and you start to learn where you can find water and the safe roads to travel on. Then, you teach that to your kids, and those kids take those same routes on when you retire. When you spend your days riding in a cramped cart like that, there’s no room for another person in there. ...Also, and this is the most important part, is where traders eventually end up. Lutz, do you know what a trader longs for, more than anything?” “...” “Citizenship.” “Huh?!” “They want to give up their difficult lifestyle, and someday settle down in a town somewhere. They want to open a shop in a town and conduct their trade in safety. That’s what a trader dreams of. You’re not going to find a single trader who’ll take you on when you already have citizenship. If you absolutely want to do it, then you’ll have to do it all on your own. There’s no apprenticeship program for traders.”

If citizenship is every trader’s dream, then Otto’s already fulfilled his. It seems like he really wanted to open a store here in the city, but I don’t know why a merchant like him would give up on that and become a soldier instead.

“Mister Otto, why did you decide to become a soldier?”

“Wait,” interjects Benno “no, don’t... ngh!”

Otto puts his hand over Benno’s mouth to silence him, then grandly, majestically states his answer.

“It was all so that I can marry Corinna!”

“Ooh,” I say, “I want to hear everything about this!” Benno, in a panic, tries to shush me. “I don’t want to hear anything about this, young lady.”

Otto, however, starts his story, his eyes glittering. “That’s right,” he says, “this happened was just after I became an adult. I was passing through this town when I caught a glimpse of Corinna, and it was love at first sight! It was like an arrow through my heart, or a flash of divine inspiration, but all I could see in that moment was her. I couldn’t marry anyone else but her, I thought, so at that very moment I started to woo

her.”

“...Mister Otto, that’s unexpectedly passionate of you.”

This former merchant, who hides his darkly calculating nature underneath a gentle smile, seems to be a passionate romantic. The color of his black tea-colored hair and his light brown eyes gives him such a composed, honest image that I never could have imagined he could pour out such passion.

“She was just so charming that I couldn’t help it. So, I resolutely made my advances, but at first she rejected me. You see, she’s a seamstress famous for her excellent skills, and on top of that she treasures the bonds she has with everyone here. She told me that she couldn’t live her life on the road.”

Ahh, of course. If you have a stable life, with enough skill and enough regular customers to earn a steady income, you won’t be able to abandon it all for an unstable life of travel. Plus, looking at it from Corinna’s perspective, wouldn’t a trader suddenly walking up to her and trying to woo her seem very suspicious? Surely she’d be wondering if that was some kind of con, wouldn’t she?

I nod along intently as I listen while Otto’s love story starts to heat up. He starts putting more and more passion in his voice, and his gestures start getting bigger and bigger.

“Corinna said she planning on marrying a man from this city, and a shock like thunder came crashing through my brain. The thought of Corinna marrying another man was completely unimaginable! After frantically trying to figure out what I needed to do, I immediately marched over to the temple and obtained my citizenship.”

“Huh? Wait a minute. Weren’t you letting your passions run a little too wild?”

I look over at Benno, wondering if Otto’s actions were at all normal by this world’s standards. Benno has his hand to his head, squeezing on his temples, an exhausted expression on his face.

“...See, even a child can see it! On top of that, the money he spent on his citizenship was all of the money he had been saving to go back to the city where his parents lived and open up a shop, right?”

“What?!”

He then explains that if you purchase citizenship in the town where your parents had citizenship, the price would be reduced by more than half, so the rest of the money could be used to open up a shop. For a trader to spend so much time amassing enough money to retire from his uncertain existence and move up to owning a shop, then spontaneously spend it all in one go on a woman he had just met... those are not the actions of a calculating merchant, but of a wild stallion who has eyes for nothing but his beloved.

“I wanted to open a shop in this town, but I didn’t have enough money left over to afford one, and I didn’t yet have any connections in this town that would lend me enough money. I had to quit my job as a merchant, then became a soldier in order to show Corinna my dedication to live in this town. I asked a favor of the squad leader who I’d made friends with after seeing him every time I came to this town, and he got me hired for a position that primarily involved a lot of paperwork. ...By the way, when I bought my citizenship, became a soldier, and proposed, Corinna was shocked!”

Well, uh, it is rather shocking. I don’t think a single young woman of marriageable age exists who wouldn’t be shocked if someone were to sell everything they have, buy a citizenship, and become a soldier just because she told him that she couldn’t live a life on the road. I want to hear things from Corinna’s viewpoint, whether she thought Otto should have reined himself in or whether her chest tightened as she wondered what about her could be so captivating. I’m absolutely sure her story is going to be very different from Otto’s.

“I kept chasing after her for many days, until I finally married her, which felt a little like being adopted into her family. She was so cute when she laughingly told me she couldn’t help falling for me after all that time! And, now...”

After that, he starts going on and on about how adorable his wife is. There was no stopping him. I really want him to not use the first-class sales pitch skills he honed during his career as a merchant when describing his wife. Lutz is left completely flabbergasted by the deluge of praise. I've heard of husbands so devoted that they'd never lay eyes on another woman, but I thought it was fathers who were so prone to exaggeration like this. These exaggerations, though, are pretty harmless.

What should I do about this? I had no idea Otto was this kind of person.

I look over at Benno, silently pleading for help. Our eyes met for a brief instant, then he clapped a hand on Otto's shoulder and sighed lightly. He looks like he's had practice at this.

"Otto, you stopped talking about being a trader a while ago, you know! That's enough about your wife, get back to the main topic."

"Ahem! Sorry. So, as I was saying, give up on being a trader."

I want to make a sarcastic quip about his use of "as I was saying", but I force myself to keep my mouth shut. He may have gotten significantly derailed, but now I know that there's no apprenticeship system for traders, the life of a trader is fraught with difficulty, the citizenship Lutz and I possess is extremely important, and that drowning in love is absolutely terrifying.

After being so plainly told to give up, Lutz gloomily hangs his head, looking so sad as to be almost pitiable. He'd spent so long thinking about his reasons for becoming a trader, but before he could get a single word out, he was told that his dream was impossible. After being beaten over the head about how difficult a trader's life is (and how awesome Otto's wife is), it's only natural to be so sad.

"...Lutz," says Otto, "this was Maine's suggestion, but instead of becoming a trader, how about doing your apprenticeship under a merchant? You'll eventually be able to leave the town on your own to go purchase supplies."

"Maine?!"

Lutz raises his head abruptly, turning to look at me. Rage flares up in his green eyes, accusing me of having known all along that they were going to tell him he couldn't be a trader.

"I thought that you should really hear it from the mouth of an actual trader," I say. "I've lived in this town all my life, so would you even believe me if I told you to stop?"

"...Ah."

From the look on his face, I've hit the bullseye. He looks away, seemingly lamenting about how unfair life is.

"When I asked Mister Otto about it, I thought that being a trader sounded way too difficult, so I started wondering if there was a job that would let you travel out of town that your parents wouldn't object to. Also, I might have just heard about this now, but I think you should stop thinking about letting go of your citizenship so that you could be a trader."

"...I guess you're right."

Now that he's heard Otto say it, it looks like he's really letting it sink in. The fanciful tales he heard from people traveling from out of town truly are entirely different from the harsh reality of being a trader.

"Daddy told me that Mister Otto has connections to some of the merchants in this city, so I asked him if he'd be willing to introduce you to someone, if you wanted it. It's your choice, though, you know?"

"...Oh, wow. You've really thought this through."

Benno looks up, letting out a deep breath. I look up as well, watching him closely. If Lutz wants to be introduced to a merchant, then the opponent he needs to beat isn't Otto. It's Benno.

"So," he says, "it seems we've been introduced, but... kid, do you want to become a merchant?"

"Yes, sir!"

Lutz nods, and Benno smiles widely, his reddish-brown eyes narrowing. The light-hearted atmosphere from when Otto was bragging about his

wife has completely blown away. Not a wisp of it remains. Benno looks down at Lutz like a carnivorous beast, his cruel eyes fixed on the opponent he will beat into submission.

“Hmm! Well now, what will you sell? If you become a merchant, what kind of things do you want to sell?”

“Um?!”

It's only natural to be asked questions about your aspirations during a job interview, but the ambitions that Lutz spent yesterday contemplating were all about being a trader. To be suddenly forced to spin those around into reasons for wanting to be a merchant's apprentice instead is no trivial matter at all.

“I'm asking you what you want to do when you become a trader, and if you can even do it.”

“Um, I...”

Eek! This is a very high-stakes interview to be giving to a child who isn't even old enough to be baptized!

I want to say that he's not being as cruel as he seems, but for a merchant, taking on another apprentice means incurring a lot of additional expense. Also, Lutz is only the friend of Otto's assistant. Benno doesn't have any obligation to take on such a large burden. If Lutz doesn't show his willpower, his determination, his knowledge about what goods he might be able to sell, and his ability to be of some use to Benno, then nobody could possibly complain if Benno cuts off the conversation right now. From Benno's standpoint, the fact that he agreed to this meeting is something that Lutz should be grateful for.

“If you don't have anything, this conversation is over.”

Lutz drops his head slightly, chewing nervously on his lips. I don't know if I should say anything. I don't know if it'll be a lifeboat for him, or a step down a painful path he shouldn't tread, but it's ultimately up to him. In a low voice only he can hear, I quietly ask him a question.

“...Could you make my paper?”

“Yeah.” “Hmm?”

Lutz suddenly looks up, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. I can feel him trembling, but the firm glare he fixes on Benno burns with raw ferocity.

“Of course I’ve got something I want to do! I’m going to make everything that Maine comes up with!”

“Yeah,” I say, “he’s always been helping me.” “Maine can barely do anything by herself, so I’m going to do it for her.”

Lutz, that was a great job. You said it perfectly. Benno’s eyes have gone wide.

I haven’t the slightest idea if any of this happened because I was the one dragging Lutz along or if he was the one dragging me along, but if Lutz is going to take on all of the things that I can’t do, then I’ll take on all of the things that he can’t do either.

Unlike Lutz, I already have plenty of experience with taking entrance examinations and applying for job interviews.

I calmly look up at Benno, a smile on my face. I take a slow breath and let it out gently, getting my breathing in order, then open my mouth to speak.

“I have an idea for a kind of paper that I’d like to sell, one that doesn’t use any animal skin. I believe that I can get its production cost down below that of parchment, so I think that it will be a very profitable good to sell.”

As I talk, Benno’s face turns sour, like he’s swallowed a particularly bitter bug. When he turns to look at me, his eyes glow with an even more ferocious light than he did when he was staring down Lutz.

“...You want to become a merchant as well?” he asks, in a low voice that almost sounds like a growl. “Yes, sir!” I nod, smiling brightly. “It’s my number two aspiration, though.”

Next to Benno, Otto doubtfully tilts his head to the side.

“Is your number one aspiration doing paperwork at the gate?”

“No, sir, it’s to become a ‘librarian’.”

As soon as I say it, all three of them look at me in unison, identically dubious expressions on each of their faces. It looks like they really didn’t understand that word.

“...I’ve never heard of that.”

“I mean that I want to manage the books in a place that has a lot of them.”

After I finish my simple explanation of a librarian’s job, Benno suddenly bursts out in riotous laughter.

“A... ahahaha! There’s no way you can do a job like that if you’re not a member of the nobility!”

“...Really? I thought that was the case.”

Those damn noblemen.

If it’s a fundamental truth that it’s only the nobility that has books, then I think it’s only natural for the librarian who manages those books to be a member of the nobility as well. I never had any real expectations about it, but this reminder of my difference in social status is still really irritating.

“Even so, a paper that isn’t parchment, huh... Do you have any of it?”

When he glances back down at me, his eyes are bright and alert. Most likely, thoughts of how much profit could be made if I really could make paper without using parchment are tumbling around in his head.

“I haven’t made any yet, sir.”

“Then don’t be ridiculous.”

He may be telling me not to say ridiculous things, but there’s no mistaking that his interest has been piqued. I think we’re just one word away from finding some common ground. I smile even wider.

“If actual paper is what you want to see, then we’ll make it. Our baptismal ceremony is summer of next year, so by spring we’ll have a

prototype of my paper design, and then I hope that you'll be the judge of whether or not we can actually make it."

"...Alright then."

I have somehow managed to wrangle an extension out of Benno, despite the fact that he came here with the full intention of dismissing us outright. This truly is an amazing victory.

"Thank you very much, Mister Benno."

"We still haven't settled on anything yet." "Even so, I'm grateful that you've given us the chance to prove ourselves."

All that's left is up to Lutz's persistence. I think that he's going to work extra-hard, knowing that my job is at stake as well. It may have been sudden, but I can't help but smile at the fact that it suddenly looks like I'll be able to obtain real paper.

"Lutz, let's do our best!"

"Yeah!"

Lutz and I also convey our gratitude to Otto, with big smiles. Thanks to him, Lutz has given up on his dream of becoming a trader, and has taken his first step towards becoming a merchant's apprentice. Out of all of the outcomes I'd considered, this is by far the best one.

"Mister Otto, thank you very much for introducing us to Mister Benno."

"You made my day off very fun! Looking forward to seeing you at the gates next time!" "Me too!"

We somehow managed to get passing marks from Otto as well. I let a big sigh of relief. I pick up on the hint in Otto's last remark, realizing that it's time to break up the meeting, and start to leave the town square with Lutz.

...Ah, I almost forgot.

I stop walking after just one step, then turn back around to call after Otto and Benno as they walk away.

“Um! Mister Otto, Mister Benno, I have something to ask!”

“Sure, what is it?” “Do either of you know of a sickness that can cause a fever that can suddenly spread throughout your body, then shrink back down again?”

Between Otto, who has been to many places in his life, and Benno, who has many connections around the area, it’s possible that one of them might have heard of something like the fevers I have.

“It felt like it got big enough to swallow me whole, but then I frantically fought against it and forced it back into a tiny shape. I’m sorry that this is such a subjective description...”

“Who knows? I haven’t heard of it,” says Otto, loosely shaking his head.

Benno looks off to the side, glances down at the ground, then slowly starts shaking his head too.

“...I don’t know.”

If this is something that even those two don’t know about, then I don’t think I can find someone who knows anything more. My illness must really be rare, then.

...Could this disease actually be extremely dangerous?

As I entertain this touch of anxiety, the meeting comes to a close.

Chapter 26: Interlude - My Assistant

My name is Otto. I am the man who loves my beautiful, adorable wife Corinna the most in the whole wide world.

Her hair is the color of cream, and the irises of her eyes are gray. Each of her pale colors adds to the gentle, pure atmosphere that floats around her. The bridge of her nose may be long, but she's so cute when she worries about how the plumpness of her cheeks makes her look a little bit baby-faced. She's so lovely when she laughingly tells me that she doesn't know what she's going to do about me. She smells great when I hold her close, her huge breasts squishing up against me. She's the best.

I'll shout it from the top of the world! My Corinna is the best woman in the world!

Today, at the behest of my helper Maine, I met Lutz, a young boy who said that he wanted to become a trader. I gently hit him with the harsh truth of reality, leaving his dreams smashed into tiny pieces.

"I'm home, Corinna!" I call out. "Benno's with me too."

"Welcome back, dear. ...So, even after bullying children that haven't even been baptized, you can still come home with a smile like that." "She's so cute even when she's pouting!"

I unintentionally blurt out my inner thoughts. Corinna looks at me in shock, then lets out a long sigh. This is a regular sort of shock, so I just shrug my shoulders and explain myself. I really had no intention to bully those children, so it's not like what I did could be considered bullying. All I did was talk to a child who still believed in fairy tales and told him about how reality truly works.

"I didn't have a choice. There's nothing good about becoming a trader, after all. Sure, I had to shatter his dreams completely, but it was for his own good."

"I guess so, but..."

Corinna looks down at the ground with her gray eyes, her eyebrows

knitting together in concern and pity. Seeing my Corinna worrying about another man, even if he's just a child, makes my heart tremble, though just a little bit.

"You're such a kind person, Corinna. You're so worried about a child you haven't even met..." I grab onto her shoulders and hug her close, just ready to kiss her. "You're blocking the door, Otto," says Benno, crossly, from behind me. "Actually go in the house, please."

Corinna, looking a little flustered, shoves me off to the side and shows Benno in.

"Come in, big brother! ...You look quite depressed, are you maybe feeling guilty about rejecting those children?"

Deep lines are carved between Benno's knotted eyebrows, and not a single trace of his usual affable demeanor can be found in his expression at all. Contrary to what Corinna is thinking, Benno actually didn't wind up rejecting Lutz, so, of course, his gloomy mood has nothing to do with guilt at all.

"No, no, Corinna, it's not that," I say. "He tried to drive away Lutz after the boy said he wanted to become a merchant's apprentice, but Lutz wouldn't be driven away. Maine set forth a few conditions, and Benno actually accepted them. She completely turned the tables on him. That's why he's depressed."

"Otto..." says Benno in a low, warning voice. I ignore him and head into the house with Corinna.

He must be feeling the effects of being done in by a child. This is great. Savor this, Benno. This is how I feel every time Maine does something shocking to me.

As we walk towards the parlor, I embrace Corinna from behind, and kiss her lovely cream-colored hair over and over. Benno clenches his fist, telling us that we should wait to do that until he's not around. Even though I want to be mad at him for interrupting our couple's time, but if I were to actually say that in front of Corinna, she'd tell me to cut it out immediately, so I bite my tongue.

The parlor is typically where Corinna entertains her customers. She works hard to keep it very clean so that she can use it whenever a customer may happen to come by. In the center of the room stands a round table, unlike the one in the dining room. Four chairs are set around it. Since the use of cloth for things besides just clothing is the mark of a wealthy individual, this parlor has much more cloth in it than any other room in the house. For instance, display shelves are arranged along the right wall, showing the patterns that Corinna can make. On the left wall, a vividly colored tapestry has been hung, sewed together out of leftover cloth.

I don't usually come into this room, since I rarely need to, but it's fun for me to just look at it, since it's decorated with Corinna's handiwork. I sit down at the table opposite from Benno, broadly grinning at him.

"Well! That really was an unexpected turn of events! I never would have thought that Benno would make a compromise..."

"What? Benno did?" asks Corinna, her gray eyes going wide. "Otto, you have to tell me everything!"

She's so cute when she pesters me with those wide eyes. Also, after she sits down on the chair next to me, she scoots it just a little bit closer. She really is adorable.

It's rare for Corinna to pester me like this, so I cheerfully recount the day's events to her, applauding Maine in my heart for her efforts.

When I finish with my story, Corinna looks at her brother, her eyes wide.

"He made himself look as good as he could before he met you, then showed up in the plaza to wait for you long before the bell actually rang... Benno, weren't you losing that fight from the very beginning?"

"Shut up..."

Benno's mood is only growing more and more foul. Even as he pours the liquor Corinna had brought out down his throat, the knot between his eyebrows doesn't loosen even the slightest. Both maintaining at least a minimum level of personal grooming and making sure you arrive earlier

than the person you're requesting a favor of to avoid making them wait are obvious, basic things for a merchant. Benno thought that he could see how prepared Lutz actually was based on whether or not he could do those basic things, but Lutz actually cleared both of those hurdles.

It was, however, probably Maine's doing.

From expression that flashed across her face the moment she saw us enter the plaza, I can't think of anything else. Today's victor was clearly Maine, and, thanks to that, I got to see a scene where Benno was forced to make a compromise.

"Well! Thanks to Maine, today was much more fun than I thought it was going to be!"

"You're talking about your squad leader's daughter, right? The one you said was extremely bright." "Yeah, that's right. Even though it's been nearly half a year since I made her my assistant, I still don't have a good grip on her. She's so peculiar that I can't help but wonder how a child like her could have been raised."

As a trader, I went to many different places and met with many different people of many different social positions, and Maine's peculiarities stand out from all of them. Benno, my companion for the day, has similar experience; as a merchant, he knows many people of note. If you think of my breadth of knowledge as wide, but shallow, Benno's is narrow, but deep.

"Hey, Otto," he says. "What was that?"

"I told you already, that was my assistant." "No, I get that, but don't lie to me: was that really a soldier's daughter?" "No doubt about that at all... but I, for one, think it's strange." "How so?" asks Corinna, head tilted to one side in wonder.

Usually, when I tell her about my day, I mention a few things about Maine, like how she's smart, or how she's frail, and so on, but this is the first time I've ever described her as strange. After all, I think she's so strange that you can't truly understand just how strange she is unless you see her for yourself.

“First of all, her appearance is unusual. She keeps herself so tidy that you’d never think she was ever a soldier’s daughter. The clothes she wears aren’t all that different than what you see on other children like her; old, worn-out, and patched in places. Her skin and hair, though, are so clean that they shine. The squad leader is a man that looks just about the same as all the other soldiers, but neither of his daughters are slightly dirty like he is, and their hair is glossy.”

“Surely their mother must be helping them take care of their skin and hair, then?”

Corinna was raised as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, so even if she’s seen how poor people live, she really can’t truly grasp what it’s really like. Putting effort into taking care of your skin and hair requires time, money, and supplies. Poor people have none of those things in abundance at all.

“...I last saw their mother this past winter, but she didn’t seem like she was taking the initiative to put in that kind of effort. She is, though, so beautiful that she’s really wasted on the squad leader.”

During a clear winter’s day, Maine stayed at the gates for a while so that her family could collect paru. When her mother came to pick up her daughter, I didn’t get the impression that she was remarkably tidy. All I really noticed was that she looked a lot like Maine, and that she was beautiful.

“Ohhh, is that so?” says Corinna, an amused twinkle in her gray eyes. It’s very rare for me to compliment other women. “Of course, you’re the best woman in my whole wide world, and that will never, ever change!”

“Yes, yes, dear, that’s quite enough. ...So, Benno, did Maine seem strange to you too?”

Benno puts his glass down, leans back in his chair, and looks up at a beam holding up the ceiling. Slowly, he takes a breath.

“Yeah. Her hair, the color of the night sky, was so glossy that it almost seemed to glow, her skin was an untarnished white, and her hands did not look like those of someone who lives a life of manual labor. Her teeth

were white, too. The beat-up dress she was wearing matched her so poorly that it almost looked forced, no matter how I looked at it.”

“Wait... hair so glossy that it almost seemed to glow?! What did she do to make it do that?!” “Huh?” I say, blinking in surprise. “Corinna, but you’re already so beautiful just as you are!” “Quiet, Otto! I’m talking to my brother.”

To women, it seems that the shininess of one’s hair is a matter of utmost importance. It’s rare for Corinna to express this much interest in something that’s not related to sewing.

“It looked like she’d put something in it, but she didn’t tell me what exactly she’d used.”

“Benno, she said it was a secret,” I added. “Otto, do you think you’ll be able to ask her about it?” asked Corinna. “...Yes, but she’s probably going to be on guard from now on, so I don’t think I’ll be able to get an answer.”

Corinna wants to know what Maine does to her hair. For Corinna’s sake, I’ll ask Maine about it the next time I see her, even though I’m certain it’s useless.

“Aside from her hair,” I say, “I think that the reason her hands are so clean is because her body is so small and weak that she can’t be of much help around the house. The whiteness of her skin is probably because she gets sick at a moment’s notice, so she doesn’t go outside very often and thus doesn’t get a lot of sun. Honestly, she’s only really started to be healthy enough to go outside since this spring.”

“...Now that you mention it, we cancelled the meeting last time because she had a fever, didn’t she?”

I nod, unable to keep off my face a faint expression of irritation as I remember how jumpy and distracted the squad leader was during his daughter’s five-day fever.

“So, in other words, Maine’s appearance is due to her weak constitution?” asks Corinna. “That’s not quite enough to call her strange, isn’t it?”

It seems that Corinna has decided this isn't that big of a deal after hearing all of this. She shrugs her shoulders, looking like she's rapidly losing interest.

Benno shakes his head. "No, it's not just her appearance that's strange. What stood out to me was her posture and her speech. ...Those were something that she couldn't have mastered without very good upbringing at home. Otto, don't tell me that she had such a strict upbringing because her parents are disgraced former members of the nobility?"

I wouldn't draw that conclusion about the squad leader's family circumstances. If you look at the rest of Maine's family, it's quite obvious whether or not they have any connections to the aristocracy.

"The squad leader has one more daughter, who is perfectly ordinary. Her hair is unusually glossy and her skin is relatively clean, though, but that's it. She's not so far beyond her peers as Maine is."

Benno nods slightly, then looks over to Corinna.

"Corinna," he says, "that girl doesn't just look strange. She had the courage to maintain eye contact when I was staring her down, was crafty enough to protect her advantages with regards to the secret behind her hair, was able to feed me a wild bluff without anything to back it up, and even negotiated terms... none of those things are things I'd expect from a child that hasn't even been baptized."

"A child that doesn't flinch away under your glare, Benno?!" asks Corinna, her eyes wide. "That child is strange. Without any doubt, that child is strange.""

When Benno starts to lay on the coercion, his eyes grow sharp like a predator's. Benno is the eldest son of the family and Corinna is the youngest daughter, so when they lost their father while Corinna was still very young, Benno stepped in to raise her in his place. He scolded her a lot whenever she got immature, and the fact that even to this day she still averts her eyes is a sign of how scary Benno can get.

"A~ah, her memory and calculation ability are also amazing!" I say. "Now that I think about it, when I gave her my slate, she surprised me

again. She picked up the slate pencil and started writing immediately, without anyone even needing to show her how to hold it! It's almost like she already knew how to write."

"Did she maybe learn by watching you?" asks Corinna, her head tilted to the side in thought.

She glances down briefly, noticing that my glass is empty, and pours me another. I take a mouthful, hesitating about how I should answer. It's true that I showed her how by example, but...

"Writing isn't something that you can just simply start doing after watching someone else, especially with how smoothly she was writing right from the start. I train all of the new apprentice soldiers in how to write every season, so I know how difficult it is to learn. When they first start, they can barely draw a line, let alone write a single letter."

"Ahh, that's right..."

Corinna has instructed quite a few apprentices of her own in a variety of things, so she knows how rare it is for someone to be able to learn how to do something just by watching.

"Her calculation abilities are also very strange. She said that she learned how to read numbers when her mother took her to the town market, but surely it's impossible for someone to learn how to do math just from being taught the numbers, right?"

"Well," says Benno, "the apprentices who come to me already know a little bit of math. It's something their parents teach them, you know?"

The children who become apprentice merchants are generally the children of merchants themselves, so it's not uncommon for the children to know how to read, write, and do basic math by the time they go through their baptismal ceremony. When I was a child, traveling with my trader parents, they taught me math and writing. Maine's calculation abilities, however, are on an entirely different level.

"...That really isn't something that you make an assistant do, usually? Letting a kid like her work on your financial report."

I shoot a glare towards an amused Benno. For the sake of shocking them, I then tell them something that I've never told anyone before.

"Don't tell anyone I ever said this, but I think I could trust her to do about seventy percent of the financial report on her own."

"...What?!" "...Seventy percent... Otto..."

They're even more surprised than I thought they were going to be. Their faces have gone rigid and their eyes have gone wide with shock. I can't help but start laughing.

"And it's only seventy percent because there's vocabulary words she doesn't know yet! And it only gets worse. When I was away from the office, she was able to perfectly handle what needed to be done when someone came through with a letter of introduction from a nobleman."

That had been shocking. I had been in a meeting that day, where my squad leader was constantly, restlessly, nervously fidgeting in his seat because he was missing the baptismal ceremony for his beloved daughter. When that let out, Maine came to me to give a report: a merchant carrying a letter of recommendation from a low-ranking member of the nobility was waiting for processing.

Essentially, when a visitor comes through with a letter of introduction from one nobleman to another, we want to accommodate them as quickly as possible, validating their information and letting them through into the town. Even if they're commoners, they should still be treated like low-ranking noblemen. That day, the meeting I was in had been called by a high-ranking nobleman. Of course, when having to decide what to prioritize, a high-ranking nobleman's request comes before that of a low-ranking nobleman's. However, if we were to mistreat a guest, then they'd get furious at how rude we were being, brandish their low-ranking noble's letter of introduction like a shield, barge into our meeting, infuriate the high-ranking nobleman present, and make an enormous mess out of everything.

Instead, Maine directed the merchant, who was not a nobleman, to the waiting room for low-ranking noblemen, tickling his sense of self-conceit,

then explained the fact that the ranking officials were in the middle of a meeting called by a high-ranking nobleman. Then, immediately after the meeting finished, she came to deliver a report so that there would be no misunderstandings with the leading private and the merchant could be swiftly processed through. She did all of this by instructing a new recruit what to do, despite the fact that he was so flustered that he was practically useless. It was perfect.

“What an amazing girl, isn’t she?” says Corinna. “Amazing, hmm... more like strange. Weird. However, I think that Squad Leader Gunther hasn’t paid much attention to her peculiarities. From his perspective, I think he just sees her as his adorable, frail little girl. If I hadn’t told him that I wanted her to be my assistant, nobody would have noticed her excellence, would they? Even now, he says things like ‘my little girl is so clever!’ without, I think, actually realizing how abnormally clever she really is.”

“It’s a good thing he’s so slow, isn’t it!” laughs Otto. “If she weirded him out, it wouldn’t be strange at all for him to throw her away!” Corinna frowns, sadly. “Don’t joke about things like that. I don’t even want to imagine it.” “It’s alright, Corinna,” I say, with a comforting smile. “Even if the squad leader did get weirded out, and if she were to be thrown out, then maybe Benno could adopt her instead. After all, she’s so brilliant that she was able to turn the tables on him completely.”

Corinna softly smiles at that. Yep, as I thought, Corinna is way cuter when she smiles.

“Hey,” says Benno, lightly drumming his fingers on the table, “do you think that girl’s going to be able to make that paper?” As he looks at me, I notice that his eyes once again are filled with a merchant’s shrewd gleam.

“A kind of paper that isn’t parchment, was it? I think she can definitely do it.”

“You’ve got a lot of faith in her, huh?” “Hmmm... earlier, she told me that there was something she wanted immediately, and she really wanted to make it, but she didn’t have the strength to do it herself... could it be that? I told her that she could always try to convince someone to do it for

her if she couldn't do it herself. If Lutz is going to be her hands and feet, moving as she directs, then she'll be able to complete it."

She told me that she regretted how little strength and stamina she had, which means that she must already know how she wanted to make it. Then, she declared that she was going to be able to make it, as if she knew her probability of success was high. Most likely, that wasn't a bluff.

"...If she actually does this, it'll turn the town's market upside down. How am I going to handle this girl?"

"Are you thinking of taking her on yourself?"

From what Benno is saying, it sounds like he's thinking about taking on not just Lutz as an apprentice, but Maine as well. It's just a guess, but when I say it out loud, Benno's eyes go wide.

"Of course! You thin I could let a something like that fall into someone else's hands?! Just what kinds of things is she capable of making by herself? That 'hairpin' she wore, whatever product she uses in her hair, paper that isn't parchment... and that's just the things that I know about from today! She has to have even more ideas secreted away. She is a calamity that could singlehandedly throw the entire market into chaos."

"Wait a minute! That's my apprentice! You can't just steal her like that!"

I don't think that Benno's claim is wrong, but I do have objections. I've spent the last half-year training her, raising her so that she can unleash her full potential on the year-end budget reports. There's no way I'm just going to stand idly by as Benno snatches her away from me. Benno, however, lets out a snort of laughter, puckering his lips into a smug sort of smile.

"She said that becoming a merchant was her number-two aspiration. She has no interest in being your assistant! You've only been training her for, what, half a year? Find someone else, Otto."

"Where am I going to find someone else who can be trained into usefulness in half a year?! Maine can think of things, Lutz can make those things, so then there's no problem at all with her continuing to work at

the gate, is there?!"

I'm especially not going to surrender her during budget season. Benno and I glare at each other with all our might, willing the other to capitulate. I grab my cup, and pound back the rest of my drink.

"Of course there is!" Benno roars. "I'm going to make her contract with the merchant's guild. I can't risk her getting snatched up by someone else."

"Think about her health, then! Working with the merchant's guild will be impossible!" "Her health?"

Benno deflates, like he's suddenly exhausted. I see an opening, and immediately hammer home my point.

"Her constitution is so weak that she's almost shockingly feeble, right? Getting her to do any sort of work that involves her body would be impossible!"

"...She's that frail, huh?" "Yeah, when she went to a nearby village on pig-slaughtering day, she suddenly collapsed. The squad leader brought her back to the night duty room so she could rest. That was the first time I really came into contact with her. I thought that she was going to be fine, since she was in a warm room with a fireplace, so I gave her a slate so she could kill some time and left her alone. Not even one bell later, she got a fever and collapsed again." "Uh?"

I needed to stand watch that day, so I'd left her next to the fireplace in the night duty room for a while. When I came back in to check on her, she'd collapsed due to fever. When the squad leader came to pick her up, he told me to pay it no mind, because it happened all the time. Her extreme feebleness seems to be something her family just kind of accepts by now.

"When spring came around, it was awful for her. She couldn't even walk on her own from her house to the gate."

"Wait... to the gate?" asks Benno. "No matter where your house is in this town, making it to the gate isn't really very far, you know?" adds Corinna.

The city is surrounded on all sides by a wall, so the town itself isn't actually all that big. Even going at a child's pace, going from the west gate to the east gate shouldn't take more than one bell's worth of time.

"That's right, the squad leader's house isn't particularly far from the south gate. However, that didn't do Maine any good. She'd get exhausted about halfway there, and after the squad leader carried her the rest of the way in his arms, she was laid out in the duty room, unable to move, all the way until noon. After that, she'd usually have to stay in bed for another two or three days."

"Hey, that... is she really alright? Won't she just die if she has to do any work?"

I can't at all say that I'm not afraid of that. In particular, Benno is always full of vigor, and his workplace is so busy that it's always brimming with raw energy. I can't imagine that being a place where Maine would be fit to work.

"Well, by the time spring was halfway through, she was finally able to make it all the way to the gate, and she needed to stay in bed far less than before. When spring was over, she was able to make it all the way out to the forest, but I think she still doesn't have the strength to do any ordinary work. So, I was thinking that she should work at the gate, where doing paperwork is her sole responsibility and she can take care of herself..."

"Mm..."

I'd said she had a weak constitution, but it seems like Benno hadn't thought that she was quite so frail. He furrows his brow as he contemplates. He might be figuring out how to change course now that he knows that all of his previous plans aren't going to work out for him. If that's the case, then I should probably give him one more piece of information.

"Lutz is the one who's always been keeping an eye on Maine. Whenever she got separated from the rest of the children coming back from the forest, Lutz stayed behind to escort her all the way back. The squad leader gave him some pocket money for it, but I think he did it because of his

strong sense of loyalty and responsibility.”

Lutz is at that age where most boys just want to run around wildly, but he’s instead always accompanying Maine. That’s not something that just anyone could do. Incidentally, I don’t have any strong sense of loyalty like that; there’s nobody to whom I’m devoted besides Corinna.

“...I can’t fathom all of that girl’s abnormalities, but that boy is pretty strange too,” says Benno. “Hm?”

Benno rubs his chin lightly, looking like he’s just remembered something. Gradually, an unpleasant expression creeps onto his face.

“It wasn’t just the girl who was able to stand up to my stare and clearly state their own opinions. Moreover, most people would ordinarily see a sickly girl like that as trouble, but he seems to treat her like he’s her guardian? He stood in front of her, like he was trying to protect her from me. Despite that, though, as soon as she started negotiating with me, he stepped back like it was only natural for him to do so.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it...”

Just like Benno said, after he clearly made his declaration, he handed the reins over to Maine as she made the proposal. This doesn’t seem to me like the usual sort of protector/protectee relationship. What kind of relationship could they possibly have?

“There aren’t very many kids who think about when they should step forward or when they should let someone else do the talking. On top of that, even though I couldn’t get any information out of the girl, she tells him everything so that he can make things for her. If I only had the girl, I wouldn’t be able to get information out of her, so it would be meaningless. If I only had the boy, then the girl would find someone else to make her things for her, so that would be meaningless too. It’s much better to keep those two as a set.”

I can’t help but smile when I see the sharpness of Benno’s merchant’s intuition. He didn’t just notice Maine, he also sized up how useful Lutz was, and after meeting the two of them just once, he so clearly noticed all of those things about them. He’s as quick-witted as they come.

“You’ve got a keen sense of smell as always... The squad leader seems to put a lot of trust in Lutz as well. He seems to be the person who has the greatest influence on her. He’s there for her right when she collapses, and he can prevent her from running amok to chase things outside her reach by skillfully helping her out.”

“Hmm, if he’s able to confidently state that he’ll make everything that Maine can come up with, then he must have something to back that up.”

Lutz had said something about how Maine was always like that. There’s probably even more things that Maine has done that I’m not even aware of.

“I think they’ve probably made some other weird things together, probably. Didn’t they mention something called ‘clay tablets’?”

“...Weird things? Damn, I have no idea what kind of things they could be making! Regardless, those two are a single set. I’ll take them both. I’ll surrender neither of them to you.”

With a single stroke, the subject was settled. Corinna stands up from her chair, leaving to go start preparing dinner. She leaves behind a lamp for the table, a small cask in case we wanted to refill our drinks, and some snacks to go with our liquor. As I gnaw on the slightly salty jerky, I look over at Benno pouring himself another drink.

“Hey, Benno. Do you have any idea of what Maine was asking about, that wriggling sort of fever inside her body?”

“...” “I’ve never heard of a fever that thrashes around inside your body like that, feeling like it’s going to consume you.”

From his reaction when Maine asked the question, I think he might have some inkling of what might be happening, and from his reaction now, I think he really does know something. His eyes are raised, just a little bit, as if he’s worried about whether or not he should say anything. After spending a while in contemplation, he mutters something in a voice that’s almost too quiet to hear.

“It might be... the devouring. I don’t have any proof, though.”

“...The devouring? What’s that?” “It’s not an illness. It’s where you let too much mana build up in you with nothing to use it on. It eats you from the inside, then you die.” “Wh... what?! Isn’t mana something that only the nobility have?”

My eyes fly open as soon as I hear that rare word. Mana is not a thing that commoners have. It’s a mysterious and powerful force. It’s not something that’s seen frequently, so I don’t know much about it at all, but it’s said you can change the course of nations if you have enough of it. That’s why those who possess mana are the nobility, governing the country at the top.

“...It’s not common, but there are people outside of the nobility who have mana. However, the magical implements needed to release that mana are very expensive, so it’s more accurate to say that only the nobility have the ability to properly use their mana.”

Benno is quickly rising through a company with connections to the nobility, so his knowledge about the workings of this country is much deeper than mine.

“Huh! Maine has mana. I wonder if that’s why she’s so strange?”

“Didn’t I just say that I have no proof? If it’s the devouring, though, that would explain why she’s so small for her age and why she collapses so frequently.” “Is mana so hazardous?”

I had thought that mana was a wondrous, useful, but mysterious thing, but if Maine’s weakness is the result of magic, then I wonder if it’s something dangerous as well.

“If this somehow really is the devouring... yeah. If it’s the devouring, and she can’t release that mana, that girl is... going to die very soon.”

“Wh-?!”

An image of Maine’s doting father flashes into my mind, and I’m hit with a feeling like a bucket of cold water was dumped over me. I stare at Benno in shock. From the serious expression on his face, this doesn’t look like any sort of joke or friendly banter.

“It seems that mana builds up in someone as they grow up, and it starts to devour their heart. There are many commoners who don’t have access to magical implements who just simply die before they’re even baptized.”

“Is there anything she can do?”

If anyone knows of a good solution to this problem, it would be Benno. As I plaintively ask for advice, he combs his fingers back through his hair, then lets out a sigh.

“If she had the backing of a noble, then they could lend her a magical implement and postpone her death. ...However, she’d effectively be theirs until she died. She’d only be living for the sake of using her power for that noble. Between dying surrounded by her family or living her entire life as a noble’s pet, I don’t know which I would rather choose.”

“ ... ”

There was no salvation in anything he just said. To be honest, I have no idea which of those two I’d pick, either. I don’t want to die, but I also am deeply concerned that being a nobleman’s pet for life would be equally awful.

“It’s a somewhat different story if you can keep the built-up power pinned down with your willpower. A child, though, doesn’t have the sheer force of will to be able to keep that up indefinitely. ...I wonder how that girl will do?”

“ ... ”

Just looking at Maine, I can tell that she has much more willpower than other kids her age. However, I don’t know if even she’ll be able to hold down her mana long enough to keep the devouring at bay. She seems to be keeping it in check for now, but if her mana keeps growing as she does, then I don’t think anyone could have any idea about when she might finally reach her limit.

“Otto, don’t look so serious. We still don’t actually know if it’s the devouring. Look at it this way: if it really was, she’d be very close to death. Do you think she’d be able to walk around outside if that were actually the

case?”

“I... guess so...”

A tiny bit of relief and a heavy pile of anxiety simultaneously crash through my heart.

That’s right, Maine has seemed close to death countless times. She may be able to walk around outside now, but that was the result of her enormous struggle during the spring. Before that, I hear that she really wasn’t able to go out like that.

Is she really going to be okay? I don’t know whether I should tell the squad leader about this or not.

Inexpressible emotions tumble around in my chest, and I down the rest of my drink.

*

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. The word Otto uses is indeed the word for “calculator” (計算機), although he’s referring to the wooden counting device he used a few chapters ago. In modern English, we say calculator to refer to an electronic calculator, but it still does actually mean “a device that calculates”.

Chapter 27: The Road to Washi

I'm going to make washi.¹ My circumstances have finally come together to let me do that. On top of that, it's not something I'm going to make, but something that Lutz is going to make for me. As a step forward in his job search, of course. Right now, I'm soaring, like a figure skater leaping in the air to spin in a full circle... no, a circle and a half!

Don't you dare snark about the idea of me jumping! It's hard in this body!

"Eheheheh. Heheheh."

"Maine, I'm glad you're in a good mood, but... you're kinda getting a little too excited! Aren't you going to get sick again?"

"It's not like I can help it! We're going to make paper, you know? We can actually make paper, you know? And, if we make paper, then I can make books! Woohoo!!"

Now that books are finally almost in my grasp, how could I possibly not get excited? As I make my way home, practically jumping with every step, Lutz lets out a sigh, like he's at his wits' end.

"...Maine, sure, we're going to make it, but... how exactly are we going to do that? I definitely have no idea. Are we going to need tools? Can we really actually do this?"

Sighing, Lutz grumbles out his objections. In an instant, I come crashing back down to the real world.

...That's right. If we don't make all of the tools ourselves, we have nothing!

I'm pretty sure I know the process for making washi. I even remember the names of all the tools we need. However, when it comes to making those tools, I might have read a few books about the sorts of things those obsolete craftsmen used, but I can't actually remember the fine details. If I don't have the tools, I won't be able to make any paper.

...Whoa, our first step is to make the tools, huh... Immediately starting to

make paper seems pretty impossible. Aaargh, once again, my modern knowledge just isn't quite good enough!

"...Hey, Maine. You just got really quiet. Don't tell me that, after all of that, you can't actually make it?"

Lutz has a look of extreme worry on his face, so I emphatically shake my head.

"Don't say that! I definitely know how to make paper. It's something I've been wanting for a very long time. But, I don't have the strength to cut up enough wood, I still don't know how to use fire, and I can't crush the fibers like I need to. I couldn't ask you to make it for me before, because that would have been too selfish..."

"I told you I was going to help you out, so I would have been fine with that..."

Lutz pouts, looking a little bit chagrined. I'm happy he's so willing to help, but making paper is going to be very physically intensive work. It's going to be on a level far above helping me dig up some clay or helping me cut some wood down to size.

"Um, Lutz, all I can do is teach you how to do it. It's not like the things we've been doing before, where I can do them myself but you helped me out, this is going to be something where you do everything by yourself, from the very start to the very end. Do you still want to do it, if it's like that?"

"Of course. I told you: you come up with things, I'll make them."

Lutz immediately nods his head, but I need more confirmation. I can't help but think that he might be getting carried away.

"That's the thing, Lutz. We have to start all the way back with making the tools first. Can you stick with that?"

"...You'll be helping too, right?"

"Of course, I'll do whatever I can!"

As I say that, I start thinking. Even when we're just getting started

making the tools, I'm going to have to figure out what kind of tools we're going to need to make the tools. While I'm at it, I should try searching my house for anything we could use as a substitute. I might make my mother mad again, but we're going to have no choice but to find substitutes for anything that we don't have the wherewithal to make ourselves.

"I'm going to write down a list of all the tools we need, and try looking for things we can use for those. If I can't find any, we're going to have to make them, though... Lutz, I'd like you to search for wood that we can use to make paper."

"We can find all the wood we need in the forest, right?"

"That's true, but I don't know what kind of wood is suitable for making paper."

I know that plants like the paper mulberry, Oriental paperbush, or ganpi are suitable for making washi, but I don't know what trees in this world would make good paper.

"Ummm, so, wood that would be easy to use in paper would have long, durable fibers. They'd need to be sticky, too, and easy to bond together, and we'd need to be able to extract a lot of them... and so on, but I don't actually know how exactly to spot what kind of tree has long, durable fibers."

On top of that, a paper mulberry's wood is only suitable if it's less than a year old. I remember reading that after two years the fibers start to stiffen and become very difficult to use for making paper.

However, I can't tell if a tree is one or two years old just by looking at it.

"...You're telling me to do something complicated like that, but I don't know how to do it either."

"I guess you're right. For now, I know that there's soft wood and hard wood, but wood is softer when it's younger, right?"

"And then it gets harder as it gets older, yeah."

Lutz, having more experience than me, knows much more about wood

than I do after all. For me, every kind of wood is difficult to cut, but Lutz knows what kinds of wood are easy or hard for him to cut, so it seems he can tell the difference between the softer and harder woods.

“Well, there’s paper we could make that uses either bamboo or bamboo grass, and there’s pros and cons to doing that, but for now, since I think we can make paper out of other kinds of vegetation, we should probably focus on a paper that’s the easiest to make for now, right? Plus, if we’re going to commoditize this, that’s all the more reason that we need to pick a wood that’s easy to use.”

“Huh...”

Lutz nods slightly, mumbling to himself about woods that might be easy to use.

“If we can find one, it would be even better if we could find trees that we could cultivate, so we could make acquiring the raw materials even easier, but we don’t know what kinds of trees are easy to cultivate, right?”

“No, trees that are and aren’t easy to grow are pretty different. There’s definitely trees that can be easily grown.”

“Really?!”

I gnash my teeth at how low Maine’s XP total is after having never gone outside. I’ve only been able to go out to the forest since a month ago. I can’t even cut any wood right now, let alone pick what kinds of wood we should be using.

“Alright, I’ll leave finding the wood to you, Lutz. I want to test a lot of different types and compare their pros and cons, so try coming up with a few kinds of soft-ish wood. After that... I want to find some ‘sunset hibiscus’.”

“What the heck is that?”

“The thing I’m thinking of is the root of that tree, but I don’t know if there’s anything like that around here. What I want is a tree that has a goopy, sticky sap... a fruit would do too, I guess. Do you know of any?”

Lutz ponders for a moment, but nothing seems to come to mind immediately.

“No..., I don’t think so.”

“We’re going to be using it as a glue to stick the plant fibers together, so there has to be something.”

“I’ll try asking someone who knows a lot about the forest.”

“Alright, then! I’ll go and work on remembering the process and writing down all the tools we’ll need to make it happen. After that, I’ll start figuring out how we’re going to make everything.”

By the time we’ve finished laying out what we’re each going to be doing next, we’ve arrived back at my house.

“We’re here,” says Lutz. “Alright, let’s do our best!”

“Yeah!”

Just making paper seems daunting, but the work of developing a prototype that could actually be turned into a salable good looks like it will require a lot of patient work. As soon as I returned home, I went straight for my slate. What I need to do now is try my best to remember the entire process involved in making washi and write out a list of all the tools I think we’ll need.

The first step of the process is to harvest the trees or plants that we’ll use as raw materials. Lutz has a knife that’s kind of like a machete, so we don’t need anything else in particular here. Right, next step.

When using paper mulberry, you need to steam the dark-colored bark off of the wood first, I think. If that’s the case, we’ll need a steamer. Since I haven’t seen our family use a steamer, if we happen to have one in the kitchen, I’ll be able to borrow it. I quickly search through the kitchen, but don’t find anything. Well, I haven’t tried to drag out any steamed recipes yet, so it’s no surprise that we don’t have a steamer. I add “steamer” and “pot” to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

When the wood is steamed, we immerse it in cold water, then

immediately skin off the outer bark while the wood is still hot. In other words, it'll be best if we don't have to go far from where we do the steaming to the river, but since we already have knives, we don't really need any other tools. Right, next step.

Neither letting everything fully dry out nor stripping off the white bark after exposing it to the river for a day requires any particular tools. Since we have a knife, we can make do. Right, next step.

Then, we boil the white bark with ash, making it soft, then remove the excess. In other words, we need a pot and some ash. We can use the same pot that we needed in order to do the steaming, but getting the ashes is going to be difficult. I'm pretty sure my mother isn't going to give me any, and I don't know if boiling the wood will produce ash in a sufficient quantity. I add "ash" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we expose it to the river for over a day again in order to remove all of the ash, then leave it out in the sun to whiten it. Then, we remove all of the chips and knots. This is, generally, all physical labor. We don't particularly need any tools here. Right, next step.

Then, we beat the fibers until they have a consistency like cotton. Here, we'll need some sort of rectangular timber that we can use for that. We should be able to make this out of either fresh wood or firewood. I add "rectangular timber" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Next, we thoroughly mix the beaten fibers with water and the sunset hibiscus sap, then spread the resulting pulp on a special frame and let the water drain out. Mixing everything together will need a bucket, tub, or some other kind of bowl. After that comes the wooden frame with a removable bamboo mat, called a suketa, we'll need in order to spread everything out. I think our suketa is going to be our number-one problem. I add "tub" and "paper frame" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we remove the mat from the frame, then transfer the drained paper to a drying bed. We let these stacks of paper dry on their own for a full day. I add "drying bed" to the list on my slate. Right, next.

After that, we slowly apply pressure to the paper using either weights or

a clamp to wring the last of the water out. After pressure is applied, we leave everything as-is for another full day, by which point the stickiness from the sunset hibiscus sap will have completely disappeared. I wonder what we could use for weights? Certainly, there's the big stone weight we use for pressing oil, but is Lutz able to use that? For now, I just add "weights".

When we're finished pressing the paper, we carefully peel it from the stacks on the drying bed one at a time, then stick it to another board. I add "flat board" to my list.

Then we let it dry in the sunlight, remove it from the board when it's dry, and then we're finished.

"Hmmm, now that I'm thinking everything out, we're going to need a lot of things, huh..."

The things we need: steamer, pot, rectangular timber, ash, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, and a flat board. Also, the raw wood and the sunset hibiscus sap.

I've seen photos and illustrations of the process, so I can generally remember how everything fits together, but since I've never actually done it for myself, I don't know any of the finer details. In our pulp, for example, what ratio of fibers to water to sap are we going to need? However, I recall watching a TV show where a particularly un-pop-idol-like pop idol went to a rural village and made some paper, and if a pop star can do it, then there's no way that I can't do it too.

I need to remember more details about that program. Memory, do your best! ...Well, hmm, that pop idol... was borrowing someone else's tools, right? She didn't have to make her own? And she had someone guiding her through the process, didn't she? Rrrrrrgh.

It's not just like I only have theoretical knowledge. I have indeed personally made paper before: in home economics class once, we made a sheet of recycled paper the size of a postcard out of a milk carton. I think it's better than nothing at all, but it's certainly not something I can actually rely on.

For now, let's try taking on the production of a postcard-sized sheet. It'll be easier to build the tools at a small scale as well, and when we're experimenting with different kinds of wood, small batches are better to make than large.

"So, Lutz," I say, "how about we start making the steamer first?"

In Chinese cooking, they use a round wooden basket to steam food. Making something like that would be very difficult, but making a four-sided wooden box shouldn't be quite so hard. I sketch out the design on my slate and show it to Lutz.

"Making it should be really simple, but do you have any nails?"

"Uh?! Can't you... put notches in the wood and join them together with those?"

"What are you talking about?"

Making the tools has hit a snag. We don't have the tools we need to make the tools.

We may be able to cut wood to size, but we don't have nails. Plus, nails here are not priced such that a child could buy them if they decided they wanted to use some. Plus, although we have the tools to cut wood, we don't have any of the smaller implements we'd need for any fine work.

It would be great if I could just borrow my dad's tools, carve out some joints, and put everything together like an old-school carpenter, but there's no way I have enough knowledge of that kind of skilled labor to actually make use of it. Incidentally, although Lutz can do many things for me if I just give him an explanation, I can't call any of it skilled labor.

Nails are something people use in their day-to-day life, so there's no way we wouldn't be able to go to a hardware store and just buy them. The problem is our purchasing power. All of our options are suddenly closed.

"What are we going to do, Maine?"

"Um, I'll consult with Otto. He's familiar with things like market prices and tradesmen, so I might be able to get nails if I help out..."

Since I can't even do any labor for my family, I have no choice but to go to the one place where someone will actually pay me for my efforts.

The next day, I go to the gates and ask Otto about it.

"Mister Otto, I have a question... Um, do you know how much nails tend to cost? Also, if you know a tradesman that sells them cheaply, I'd really appreciate it if you could introduce me to them..."

"...Why nails? I don't think you're going to be able to make use of them, Maine."

That's right. I don't have enough strength to actually use a hammer.

For someone who used to ask for slate pencils and ink to suddenly start asking for nails must be incomprehensible to him. As he tilts his head to the side in wonder, I sigh, then start to explain.

"I want to start making the tools I'll need to make paper, but I don't actually have the tools I'll need to make those tools."

"Ahahahahaha...!" Otto bursts into laughter, slapping the table as he laughs wildly.

"It's not funny!" I say, pouting at him. Of course, just the other day, I harshly declared to Benno that I was absolutely going to make it by spring, so for me to immediately turn around and say that I can't even start on the tools might actually be really hilarious. For me, however, it's a really serious matter.

Otto wipes a tear from his eye as he calms down, a wide grin spreading across his face. I can clearly see that this is the slightly menacing smile of a calculating merchant. As he chuckles pleasantly at me, I'm suddenly very much on my guard.

"If you teach me how to make whatever it is you put in your hair, how about I finance your nail purchases?"

The value of what he's asking for does not at all match what he's offering. This is an absurdly huge ripoff. If Otto were to then let that information slip to Benno, then I would lose one of my most important

cards that I could use against him. The price of that is far too high.

“...Just for some nails, I can’t tell you how to make it. When I think about Benno’s reaction the other day, I think it might be something very profitable.”

“...You’ve got good eyes,” he mutters, with the tiniest gleam of admiration in his eyes.

As I stall with a vague sort of answer, I frantically start to think. I’ve got no other rope to cling to besides Otto’s, so if I lose him, I’ve got nothing. I have to come to some sort of compromise here.

...Why would Mister Otto be so interested in my simple all-in-one shampoo?

Otto, unlike Benno, is not a merchant. Therefore, I don’t think he wants to bring it to market as a new commodity. It might make sense if he wanted to get Benno indebted to him.

...Otto is a comparatively neat person, but he doesn’t seem to be the type to care enough about his appearance that he’d go to the trouble of making something just for it. If I really had to say it, the people who’d want to do that would be women... his wife?! Is it his wife?!

“...Mister Otto, it’s too much for me to tell you how to make it, but if you wanted to exchange goods, I’d be okay with that.”

“Yeah?” he says, raising his eyebrows a little bit.

Based on his look of interest, it seems like learning my methods might not actually be the important thing here. I fix my gaze on my tiny chance of victory and take another step forward.

“...Ummm, that’s right. I can teach Miss Corinna how to use it, and show her how to make her hair smooth and glossy. I could just give you the product, but it would be useless without the instructions, so that’s what I can offer you.”

“Sounds good to me. It’s settled, then!”

Otto nods in agreement, looking like he didn’t even give it a second

thought. I had thought that bringing up Corinna would be my most effective move, but I didn't think that such a simple thing would take me quite that far.

"Well then," he says, "come over to my house on my next day off. Let's make the exchange then, alright?"

"Alright!"

Just like that, it was decided that I'd bring my simple all-in-one shampoo to Otto's house on his next day off, then play beautician (a shampoo-only beautician) for the day.

I breathe a little sigh of relief at having somehow managed to secure some nails, but my own stock of shampoo is already almost entirely gone. On top of that, because this shampoo is a consumable good if you can't make more of it, from now on it's very likely that Otto will insist on making more trades in the future.

"Lutz, I got us some nails."

"Seriously? Wow, Maine, you're really amazing, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm going to get some in exchange for giving Otto some 'simple all-in-one shampoo', but... I don't have much of it left. Would you mind helping me make some for me today?"

"Sure, sounds good."

Better yet, if I make a little more of it to put aside, why couldn't I use it as a source of additional fundraising?

"If we had a little more time, we could gather melil to use for this, but in this season, rio is the best fruit for it."

Lutz and I gather rio fruit from the forest, then go back to my place to squeeze the oil out of it. Lutz still can't use the big stone weight to press it down, so we smash it out with a hammer. I take the freshly-squeezed oils and throw various herbs in one by one.

"Hmmm!" says Lutz. "That's really simple to make, isn't it?"

"That's right. The important part of this is the kind of oil you use and

the kinds of herbs you mix it with. So, Lutz, even if we're going to be selling the finished product in exchange for the things that we want, we can never show anyone how it's made."

"Why?"

"Since it's so simple, once you show someone how to do it, they can make it themselves, right? You won't be able to trade with them ever again, you know?"

"Ah, okay! I get it."

I take a portion of the completed shampoo, put it in a somewhat small container, and hold it out for Lutz. He looks down at it dubiously, head tilted to one side.

"I don't need any, though? Maine, you're the one getting money and buying things, so you should hold onto that."

"This is your share after making it, Lutz. How about you use it to make Mrs. Carla happy? Hasn't she been pestering you about what you did to your hair?"

After I made Lutz's hair look good to prepare for his interview with Otto, his mother started persistently assaulting me with questions. I haven't met her since then, so I'm sure that she's turned her questioning on Lutz.

"Oh, thanks a bunch! You're a lifesaver, Maine."

With a happy look, he takes the container from me. I grin broadly at him, imitating Otto's smile.

"Mrs. Carla is a very forceful woman, so you have to make sure that you don't let her get the secret of how to make it out of you. This is good practice for giving someone something without telling them how it was made. When we become merchants, we're going to have a whole lot of things that we're going to need to keep secret, after all."

"...I really want to practice on something easier, though..." he says, smiling dejectedly.

I still don't have those nails in hand. The road to washi will be a long

one.

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Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Washi is a kind of paper that was made in Japan, using primarily manual methods.

Chapter 28: The Invitation To Otto's Residence

The invitation to Otto's residence is a formal invitation from Corinna, delivered to me through Otto. It's a thin board on which words have been written.

"This really isn't something I should respond to by myself," I tell him. "If I don't ask my mother first..."

It is probably very strange for a child such as myself who hasn't yet been through their baptismal ceremony to receive a written invitation like this. Wouldn't this ordinarily be something addressed to one's parents? That would mean that my parents would be the people who'd decide if I would actually attend.

Otto raises his eyebrows slightly at my remarks, then shakes his head. "Out of your entire family, aren't you the only one who can really read? On top of that, this isn't something you can refuse. If you did, there's a chance that your mother and your sister would suddenly see their work dry up, after all."

"What?! Wh... what are you saying?!"

Corinna's parents run a successful company, and she herself is quite skilled, so she must be a fairly influential member of the tailor's guild. Based on the various explanations I've been given, if Tory's seamstress apprenticeship is like being a part-timer, and my mother's work at the dyery is like being a line manager, then Corinna can be thought of as being an executive.

Hierarchical societies are scary. I can't turn this one down. Got it.

This, though, isn't an invitation from Corinna, but one from Otto, so my father might be able to reject it using his own authority. This is very complicated.

"Besides," says Otto, "I thought that now would be a great chance to study written invitations, too."

“Oh, I see! Thank you very much.”

With Otto’s help, I look over the invitation, learning about both invitations themselves and how to reply to them.

“Did you just say a written invitation from Madam Corinna?! What? Seriously?! Why?!”

“She heard about my ‘simple shampoo’ from Otto, and wants to try it for herself.”

“Well, I’ll be!”

When my mother saw me return home bearing an official written invitation, she flew into a huge panic. I try asking her if I should decline after all, but in her excessive panic her eyes go wide with rage.

“Turning it down would be unthinkable! We have to be polite!”

“Okay! I’ll be careful.”

Somehow, this seems less like an invitation, and more like an official summons.

After that, my mother frantically starts making me a brand-new apron. It seems that going to Corinna’s dressed in my usual clothes would not be proper. As she works, she warns me about every breach of etiquette she can think of, so that I won’t accidentally be impolite. All I had planned to do was teach Corinna how to use my shampoo, but it’s somehow turned into this huge uproar.

“You’re so lucky, Maine... You’re going by yourself, even though I’m the one who made it...”

“Mommy, can Tory go with me too?”

“Absolutely not! She doesn’t have an invitation.”

Although I’m the one who thought up the simple shampoo, Tory’s been the one doing the manufacturing up until now. I think she’s more than qualified to come along with me, but since bringing an uninvited guest along with you is rude even here, Tory is going to be stuck at home no matter how jealous she may be.

Otto and I have arranged to meet in the central plaza at the ringing of the third bell, just like last time. On top of my usual clothes, I put on the brand new apron my mother made for me, and head off with my father towards the plaza. I bring my tote bag with me, into which I made very sure to put a little jar full simple shampoo and a comb.

When we arrive, Otto is already waiting near the fountain. My father promptly turns me over to him.

“Squad Leader,” says Otto, “Don’t worry, I’ll take proper care of her. Now, Maine, shall we?”

“Yep. See you later, Daddy!”

“Yeah.”

After waving farewell to my father, Otto starts walking towards the castle walls. It seems that his house is near the castle. The closer you get to the castle where the nobility live, the higher the rent becomes, so it looks like Otto’s house is in what you might call an exclusive residential district.

“Mister Otto, you live near the castle walls, even though you’re a soldier?”

“I live in an apartment above Corinna’s parents’ home. Her older brother couldn’t bear to let go of his adorable little sister, so he told her to live there.”

“Huh, I see...”

Now that he mentions it, I think I remember hearing that it’s almost like he married into her family. Certainly, without the financial support of his wife’s family, he wouldn’t be able to afford living in such a place on a low-ranking soldier’s wages. He told me that he’d used up all his life’s savings to purchase his citizenship, so perhaps was everyone connected to his wife extremely concerned about how penniless they were immediately after getting married?

Gradually, the kinds of people I see walking around start to change from what I’m used to. Their clothing is less and less patched together, and

incorporates more and more fluttering, decorative fabrics in their design. The shops on the first floors of the buildings we walk past are different, as well. The shops themselves are bigger, with more employees and more customers going in and out. Along the roads, the number of coaches and wagons has been increasing, while I've been seeing fewer and fewer donkey-drawn carts.

It's an almost physical shock to see that such a clear class divide exists in a single city, and just within walking distance for me, too. I'd read about things like this, so I kind of had an idea of what it was like already, but there's a night and day difference between imagining it and seeing it right in front of me. Eyes gleaming, I take in as much of the surroundings as I can.

"It's on the third floor here," says Otto.

"The third?!"

Otto's residence is on the third floor of a seven-story building. When the first floor of a building is a store, the second floor is generally the residence of the store's owner. The third through sixth floor are rented out, and it's very common to see the seventh story used for housing for the live-in apprentices and other employees of the store. The closer a floor is to the road, and the closer it is to a well, the more expensive it is. If I had to say it, my home is on the fifth story of a building out by the gates. (Please understand my financial situation.) For Corinna to have a place reserved for her right above her parents' residence, she really must be this store's beloved princess.

...I wonder how he was even allowed to marry her. This is surprising! A trader and a rich young woman surely have very different social stature, I think, so how did something like this happen in this world?

"I'm home, Corinna! I've brought Maine with me."

"Welcome, Maine. I've been waiting to meet you. My name is Corinna. I'm Otto's wife."

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Corinna. My name is Maine. I'm grateful to everything your husband has done for me."

This is my first time seeing Corinna, and I'm startled by how pretty and lovely of a woman she is. Her hair is a pale cream, as if the light of the moon had gathered in it. She has is gently gathered behind her, accentuating her slender neck. Her eyes are a silvery gray as well. Her whole color scheme is very light, making her seem almost ephemeral.

In contrast, her boobs are huge. Everything she's got that sticks out sticks way out, and her waist is very narrow.

Otto, you're so shallow!

As I'm lead into the parlor, I let out an appreciative breath as I see the patchwork tapestries, Corinna's handiwork, that decorate the walls. This is my first time since coming to this world that I've seen a house with anything ornamental in it. This is probably the room she uses to meet with potential clients, so it's filled with both a large quantity of clothes as well as these decorations made from the fabric remnants. The colors throughout the room are put together with a good eye, giving the room a relaxing atmosphere.

However, even in the house of a wealthy merchant, there are still more subtle concessions to frugality than I would have otherwise thought. The round table and chairs in the center of the room are neither finely engraved nor gleamingly polished, but are a simple, unornamented wooden design, with the wood left as is.

If I remember correctly, the furniture of Northern Europe tended to be simple. Also, because people are often shut inside for long periods of time during the winter, perhaps the furniture is designed such that it's possible to use it for long periods of time without getting tired of it.

"Thank you for coming all this way," says Corinna. "I've been very much looking forward to this ever since I heard you were coming to work on my hair."

As Corinna pours us some herb tea, the gentle voice she directs at me oozes the feeling of a well-raised daughter of a rich family. Her calm demeanor is one that could stir up a desire to protect her from harm.

"I'm very flattered. I've heard so many things about you from Mister

Otto as well, so I've also been looking forward to meeting you. He'd told me how beautiful and adorable you are, but the way you've decorated this room and the quality of the clothes you have laid out is beyond what I had heard."

"...You really are a very well-disciplined young lady. And, your hair is just as pretty as I had heard. I wonder, will my hair become like this as well?"

Enraptured, Corinna gently strokes my hair. Last night, in order to make sure the value of this shampoo as a commodity was plainly visible, both my mother and Tory worked hard to make my hair practically shine. Today, my hair is even more glossy than it usually is.

"Shall we begin immediately?" I ask.

As I pull the small jar from my tote bag, Corinna's face lights up with excitement. She's absolutely adorable when she's expressing herself so openly. I can definitely see why Otto dotes on her so much.

"I would like to wash your hair, so I'll need to make the necessary preparations for bathing. If it isn't too much to ask, may I bother you for a bucket full of water and a cloth for washing?"

"Bathing, you say?"

Otto, not Corinna, shouts out in astonishment, his eyes going wide.

"...I'm only going to be washing her hair, Mister Otto. Umm, Miss Corinna, while Mister Otto is getting things ready, would you please change into clothing that is okay to get wet?"

"Yes," she replies.

"...Oh, she's going to be wearing clothes, huh."

Corinna isn't just a child like Lutz, so it's only obvious that I'm not going to tell a woman such as herself to strip down. ...Wait a minute, why are you talking like you're hugely disappointed?

Otto stands up to get everything ready for bathing, saying that physical labor is the man's job. He spreads out a cloth in the bedroom and brings in some water, then sets a small washcloth next to my jar of shampoo.

“...This is it, huh. What do you do with this?”

Otto, with keenly interested eyes, picks up the jar, shakes it a bit, peeks inside, and takes a sniff. I’m suddenly keenly aware that if he were to stick around while I’m working on Corinna’s hair, he’ll try to help out with everything, keep opening his mouth, and otherwise constantly butt in on the two of us, making the whole process extremely bothersome.

“This isn’t for men to see,” I say. “If you’re done with setting up, Mister Otto, please wait in another room.”

“What? I’m her husband!”

“If you’re the husband, then it’s even better for you to wait outside. When we’re finished, you can look at how beautiful your wife has become and shower her with compliments. Please don’t do something as ungentlemanly as watching a woman pretty herself up.”

“That’s right,” says Corinna. “Otto, please do wait in another room.”

The two of us join forces and drive Otto, who still clearly wants to stay, out of the bedroom. I can hear his footsteps through the door as he wanders aimlessly around outside, but I ignore him, pouring some of the contents of the little jar into the washing bucket.

“This is called a ‘simple all-in-one shampoo’. To use it, you first fill up a bucket with about this much water, then pour about this much ‘shampoo’ into it.”

“Ahh...”

“Next, we’ll drench your hair in the bucket, and wash it. Could I ask you to untie your hair, please?”

Corinna loosens her hair, and I timidly lower it into the bucket. Somehow, it’s not as dirty as I thought it would be; perhaps it hasn’t been that long since she last bathed. In order to make sure her scalp is thoroughly cleaned, I pour water over her head over and over as I wash.

“Please make sure you make extra effort to clean this part,” I explain as I work.

“...Letting someone else wash my hair feels really nice. I never knew that before.”

“I think that Otto would be happy to do it for you if you asked, you know?”

Or, rather, I’m pretty sure he’d try to jump in even if she didn’t ask.

“Oh? But didn’t you say that it was ungentlemanly for him to watch?”

“...I just thought that it would be a problem for him to be bothering the two of us, that’s all.”

“My! Heh heh, I wonder what in the world Otto has been saying around you for such a young girl as yourself to say things like that?”

It’s harder for me to wash Corinna’s hair than it is for me to wash Tory’s, since Corinna is so much bigger. I know without a doubt, however, that Otto is going to base the number of nails he gives me on how satisfied she is with my handiwork. I work diligently, to the very best of my ability.

“...Maine, do you mind if I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

I hear a hint of sharpness in her voice, and I’m suddenly put on edge.

“What’s Otto like, at the gate?”

“...Huh?”

I was totally preparing myself to deflect a question about how to make my simple shampoo. Her question caught me completely off-guard, and what she was asking didn’t immediately register in my mind. I tilt my head to the side in confusion.

Corinna frowns. “He gave up on his career as a trader all because of me,” she murmurs. “Sometimes I worry...”

“There’s no need to worry,” I say. “Even working at the gates he’s still very much a trader.”

He handles all of the accounting work by himself, even though it’s so

busy. He haggles with traders over the prices of goods and furnishings. He uses his position at the gate to its fullest to gather useful information. Truly, his guiding principles are that of a trader.

“Really? ...He’s a trader, at the gate?”

“Yes, he is. For example, when merchants come to deliver things to the gates, the wicked smile on his face while he drives down the price of the order is very trader-like.”

“Heh heh, so you can see the trader in him. Yes... yes, of course. It’s a big weight off my chest to hear that.”

I use the washcloth to dry off Corinna’s cream-colored hair. As I start to comb it out, it starts gleaming like a pearl.

Just like when I was washing Lutz’s golden-blond hair, I’m envious of how pretty Corinna’s hair looks. It would be great if my hair looked like that, wouldn’t it...

“If you can, please use a wooden comb when you comb out your hair. As you continue to use it, the wood of the comb will absorb moisture from your hair, and will make it shine even brighter.”

“Alright. ...It’s really become quite beautiful, hasn’t it,” she murmurs appreciatively as she runs her fingers through her hair.

“The color of your hair was already very nice, so all you need to do is maintain it to bring out its natural beauty. I recommend that you wash it like this every five to seven days.”

I gesture at the pot, which contains the rest of the shampoo, as I give my recommendation. Corinna frowns slightly, tilting her head to the side.

“Are you really alright with giving me this? I feel rather bad, not giving you anything in return...”

“That’s alright. Mister Otto is already paying me for it, in nails.”

“...Nails? Huh? Isn’t he getting the better end of the bargain? Are you alright with that?”

Even though he might be profiting more right now, I haven’t given up

the recipe for how to make my shampoo, I'm getting my hands on the nails that I wanted to get, and since I know that Corinna is going to want more shampoo in the future, I'll be able to get more things I want in the future, too. There's really no problem here.

"Um, Maine. My clothes have gotten a bit wet, so I'd like to change. Would you mind waiting with Otto in the other room?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I leave the bedroom so that Corinna can change her clothes in peace. As I open the door to leave, though, I see Otto, loitering by the bedroom door like a hungry bear waiting for his food to appear.

"Corinna?!" he exclaims.

"My clothes got a bit wet," she says, poking her head around the door just a little bit, "so I'm going to change into something else. Otto, take care of Maine for me, would you?"

Her hair still hasn't completely dried, so it slips along her damp clothes as she peeks around the corner. Her shy demeanor radiates a certain kind of appeal.

"I'm sorry to let you see me like this," she says. "I'll get changed right away."

Corinna hurriedly ushers me out of the room, then quickly closes the door. Otto had caught only a glimpse of her just now, but he's staring at the door with a completely blank expression. When I see Otto's longing reaction after only seeing a little bit of her, I strike a triumphant victory pose in my heart. Without a doubt, he's falling in love with her all over again.

"Eh heh heh, hasn't Corinna become even more beautiful than before? Her creamy hair is shining like a jewel..."

"Ngh! Corinna!"

"She's still changing!!"

Otto unthinkingly starts charging towards the bedroom door, and I

hurriedly try to block him. Of course, with my strength, I can't do anything to stop him. The only one who can stop his rampage now is Corinna.

"Otto," she says from the other side of the door, "do you really want Maine to see me while I'm in the middle of changing?"

As soon as he hears her gentle voice, he suddenly stops moving, like his batteries got yanked out. After a brief moment of silence, he turns to me. He gives me a beautiful, terrible smile as he firmly squeezes my shoulder.

"...Maine, didn't you have something important you needed to go do?"

I get it. I want to make out with my wife, so get the hell out of here, he's saying.

I glance over at the bag sitting on the kitchen table. "I might remember something, depending on the number of nails I get," I say, smiling sweetly.

He looks at the bag of nails, then back at me. In his eyes, I can see a battle raging between his cool, calculating trader's senses and his burning love for his wife.

"..."

"If you give me all of them, I might even give my father a good excuse for why I'm going home alone."

Otto, who'd promised he would properly look after me, presses the entire bag into my arms, and I quietly head out the door.

...Go get 'em, tiger! Well, I acquired even more nails than I was hoping for, so, whatever. Please, do whatever it is you're going to do!

Gripping the bag full of nails tightly in both arms, I struggle my way down the street, all alone. Nails are heavy. A single one is pretty light, but when you pile them up like this, they're heavy as hell. Even after just walking a little bit, my arms are already trembling.

It's no use. I need a break.

At this rate, I'm not going to be able to stumble all the way home. I manage to make it to the fountain in the central plaza, then sit down to take a break.

My arms hurt.

As I shake out my trembling hands, then rub them together, Lutz comes into view, on his way home from somewhere. He walks past me, briskly.

“Oh? Lutz, what’re you doing here?”

“Maine?! What are you doing here? Uh... all by yourself?!”

Fundamentally, my usual area of action is confined to my home, the gates, and the forest. Since I only ever take the shortest possible distance anywhere, I’m never out here in the central plaza. On top of that, since I have a habit of unexpectedly collapsing at any time, anywhere, it’s unheard of for me to be anywhere by myself. Lutz’s eyes go wide.

“Hm? I’m on my way back from Mister Otto’s place. I was able to get all these nails from him. They’re really heavy, and it’s really far, so I’m taking a break.”

“Argh,” he grumbles, “I’ll carry those for you. Man, why didn’t he make sure bring you back safely?”

As he mumbles under his breath, he picks up the bag full of nails. I may have found that bag so heavy that it physically hurt me to carry it, but Lutz lifts it up like it isn’t even that big of a deal.

“Thanks a lot, Lutz.”

As the two of us walk back home, we tell each other about everything that happened today. While I was exchanging my shampoo for these nails, it looks like Lutz was asking around, checking with people who know a lot about the forest or know a lot about handling lumber to see if there might be any kinds of wood that would be easy to make paper with, or any plants that might be a reasonable substitute for sunset hibiscus.

When making washi, you traditionally use sunset hibiscus as a binding agent, but here, if you’re looking for a sticky liquid, it seems that your best bet is either edil fruit or the bodily fluids of a slarmo bug.

Ur... urgh. I’d much, much prefer to use edil fruits than squeezing out an insect’s fluids. Bugs, though, might be more resilient to the changing of

the seasons...

I shake my head to clear out the unwanted thoughts of juicing bugs, then change the topic of conversation.

“Now that we’ve got nails, we can start working on the steamer.”

“Hm? How big are we going to be making it? Didn’t you say you wanted it to match the pot we’ll be using? Did you get your mom to say we can use yours?”

Our steaming basket doesn’t need to be very large at the moment, since we’re just starting out, but if we can I’d really like to match it up with the pot we’d be using. However, both of our families use their pots only for cooking. Even if we ask to borrow one, it’s unlikely they’ll lend it to us.

“...No, I didn’t. Actually, one time she got really mad at me and told me not to use the pot for anything that wasn’t food.”

If my mother won’t even let me cook dried fish, I don’t think she’d lend me a pot so that I can steam or boil any wood to make paper.

“That’s no good,” he says.

“It really isn’t. ...So what do we do?”

“Well, it’s not like I can make one myself...”

Pots are expensive. Extremely expensive. They’re always in use, even when they’re in need of repair. This isn’t the kind of thing that we can easily get our hands on just because we want one. Manufacturing one out of metal would also be very difficult.

“That’s right, isn’t it... maybe we should make the paper frame first. We already know how big it’ll be, so we can start on that now.”

“...I guess we have to build what we know we can build, yeah.”

We got even more nails than I’d hoped for, and we’ve tentatively identified some materials we can use as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap... so that’s a step forward, at least... right?

Chapter 29: Benno's Summons

While doing our gathering in the forest, Lutz and I start work on building the paper frame. The basic part of it is just a wooden frame, which we can build relatively easily out of wood and nails. The hardest part will be cutting lumber to size and making sure it's straight; apart from that, the rest of the construction isn't particularly difficult. In particular, since we're not making a particularly large sheet of washi, just something about the size of a postcard, we don't need to have any extra beams to support the paper mat.

I'll try constructing this following the pattern of the little frame I used when I made paper in home economics class.

"Umm, if you could make it kinda like this..."

On my slate, I show Lutz a sketch of the general shape of the frame, then write out the list of necessary components. As he looks it over, we head off to start cutting timber.

"We have to make sure they're perfectly straight, or it's not going to work. It's okay if we have to shave things down to make them fit together at the end, though."

"That's harder than I thought. Straight, huh..."

He cuts the wood into pieces for two rectangular frames, so that the inner dimensions are about the same size as a postcard. Once we finish building the structure for the upper and the lower frames, we attach boards to prevent the upper frame from sliding around as we spread out the pulp and a handle so that we can easily hold the upper frame by hand.

"That's it! Lutz, this is looking great!"

"Is this what you wanted?"

"Yeah! We're going to put the paper mat between these frames like this, then grab the handle and rock it back and forth to spread out the fibers evenly. This is about the right shape for that."

"Shape?"

Seeing Lutz's dubious expression, I set the two frames on top of each other, then rattle them a bit to point out the uneven gaps between the two of them.

"We need to make sure that there's as few gaps between the two frames as we can get. Once we shave and polish these down so that they're precisely flat, it'll be perfect."

"Precisely?! I can't ask my dad or brothers for help, and I don't have the tools for that, you know..."

"...Can you borrow the tools?"

"I dunno..."

Although Lutz may have given up on becoming a trader, he is still refusing his parents' wishes for him to find a job relating to the woodworking or construction industries and has instead decided all by himself that he's going to become a merchant's apprentice. He must be getting an incredible amount of pressure from his parents. He's not really in a circumstance where he can just walk in and ask to borrow some tools or get some help building something.

Lutz's father thinks that merchants are cold-blooded people who think about nothing but money, and is absolutely opposed to his son becoming someone like that. His mother, Carla, is very glad that he's given up on being a trader and is instead looking for a job in the city, but she still wishes Lutz would give up on being a merchant, too.

No matter what kind of opposition he might face, Lutz isn't going to give up his dreams and will just keep forging ahead, despite his family's disapproval. As for me, there's not much I can actually do. My interactions with his family are usually restricted to indirectly talking about his tenacity and grabbing hold of their appetites with my recipes.

Since we were able to get the frames in more-or-less the right shape, in the worst-case scenario we can whittle them down if it turns out we can't actually use them. The biggest problem now is probably the mat we'll be spreading the paper on. It's a series of thin, rolled cylinders, almost like calligraphy pens, and we're going to need to make it entirely from scratch.

We need both bamboo rods of equal diameter and thread. Strong thread, at that, stronger than the kind of thread that Lutz and I ordinarily have access to. Getting bamboo rods down to the right size is going to be difficult as well. Even though we're only making something postcard-sized, it's easy to see that this is going to be an extremely difficult process.

"Since we were able to make the frame today, tomorrow let's start whittling down bamboo in order to make our rods. Although, can we actually make them round so easily, I wonder? Since we need them to be about the same size and thickness, I wonder if we should make them rectangular, instead? What do you think?"

"I can't really say I know anything about either making or using them..."

Since I'm still not very good with my knife, I'm not particularly useful, but that doesn't change the fact that we're going to need a lot of these, and that they need to be very thin. However, I'm still very happy, since we managed to meet our goal for the day and make our frame.

As we pass through the gates on our way home, Otto calls out to us. "Maine, ah, Lutz, too! Could you come here for a minute?"

It wouldn't be unusual if he were just calling me over, since it could be something relating to my job as his assistant, but this is the first time he's called Lutz over as well.

"Me too?" Lutz asks as we walk over.

"That's right. I have a written invitation for the two of you."

He delivers us another invitation, just like the one Corinna sent to me the other day. My studying has born fruit, and I quickly skim it, picking out who the sender and addressee are. It's an invitation from Benno, addressed to me and Lutz.

"From Mister Benno, to me and Lutz?"

"Huh, I wonder why?" says Lutz.

I thought we wouldn't see him again until we'd successfully made paper. I have no idea what this invitation could be about, since the two of us

aren't his apprentices yet.

"This says tomorrow," I say, "so this must be really urgent. What could it be? ...Maybe, is he rejecting us without even seeing our product?"

Perhaps someone with a stronger connection to him asked for a favor and he decided to take someone else as an apprentice, or perhaps he was able to piece something together from bits of information I've let slip and intends to make it himself so he doesn't need us anymore... all of the worst-case scenarios start tumbling around in my head.

"What?!" exclaims Lutz. "Are you serious?!"

"No, no!" says Otto, quickly. "It's not that!"

I frown up at him. "Mister Otto, do you know what this is about?"

"...Aaah~, well, so after Benno saw Corinna's hair, he started hammering me for information, so I just kind of let my part in all of it slip out, so it's about all that."

"So this invitation is your fault, then! Why would you just let that slip out?!"

"Isn't it only natural for a husband to brag about how his wife has become so beautiful?"

Did he specifically go to Benno's place to brag about Corinna to get back at me for taking every last nail from him?

Although I have plenty of complaints for Otto, that doesn't change the fact that this invitation has been delivered into our hands, and since we're hoping that he'll accept us as his apprentices, this isn't something that we're going to be able to decline.

"This says we're supposedly going to meet him for lunch," I say. "I wonder if we'll be able to eat something amazing?"

"Ohh! I'm going! I'm absolutely going!!"

Lutz is suddenly one hundred percent all-in on going to this thing. A poor child who is always hungry would be dazzled in a single instant by the thought of a sumptuous meal. I'm also actually fairly interested in

what rich people eat.

The written invitation also lists the time and place at which we should meet. Benno would like us to meet him at his shop, when the fourth bell chimes.

“...Where is Benno’s shop?” I ask Otto. “We don’t know where that is, you know?”

“It’s on the first floor of my building.”

Otto’s home is above Corinna’s family’s home, and was prepared for Corinna by her much older brother who was worried about his adorable little sister. So, Corinna must be Benno’s younger sister, so Otto and Benno must be...

“...Is he your brother-in-law?”

“That’s right.”

I guess it isn’t strange at all for the things I talk about with Otto to go straight through to Benno, then. I don’t really feel like saying anything more.

The next day, Lutz and I put on the nicest clothes that we can, then start heading towards Benno’s shop. After we pass through the central plaza, the buildings around us start steadily becoming nicer. Lutz has never gone past the plaza to the castle walls before, so he is constantly looking around, taking in everything he can see.

“Wow, this is amazing...”

“Yeah, it’s totally different, even though it’s still the same town. I was super surprised as well, back when I went to Otto’s house.”

“If the town can change this much, I wonder if lunch is going to be this much better than what I get at home! I’m really looking forward to this.”

Lutz’s smile is both broad and innocent. I sigh lightly, and give him some advice.

“You should be careful about how you eat.”

“Hm?”

“I think he’s absolutely going to be checking our table manners, like how we eat.”

“What?! I don’t know anything about that, though!”

I don’t know anything about it either. More accurately, I don’t know whether or not I’ll be able to pass my own table manners off as what they have here. We have only a single countermeasure.

“Be careful about your posture. Then, instead of just immediately shoving food into our faces, let’s watch how Mister Benno does it first. I don’t think it’ll be a big mistake to copy what he does.”

“...Aw maaan, now I’m nervous!”

Uneasy with uncertainties over what might lie in store for us, the two of us continue forward, holding hands for some reason. We arrive in front of Benno’s shop well before the fourth bell has rung. Since our meeting is at the fourth bell, we need to kill some time waiting by the shop.

“What do we do now?”

“Hm? Well, since we’re already in the area, I want to take a look at the shop. I don’t know anything at all about how it’s managed, how many people work there, what apprentices do there, or anything at all, really.”

“...You’re right.”

I’m used to using the internet or magazines when it comes to researching a potential place of employment. Here, though, I have neither of those things. Instead, you have to either pick things up by word of mouth or go to see things with your own eyes. If you don’t do either of those things, you can’t get any useful information.

Normally, you’d learn about how a particular industry worked by hearing about your parents’ jobs, and then you’d learn about the place you’d be working by listening to what the person to whom you were referred had to say. However, since Otto kept the fact that he and Benno were brothers-in-law, I don’t know if he’ll let any useful information flow. When I brought

Lutz to hear Otto talk about being a trader, even Benno introduced himself as “an acquaintance from when Otto was a trader”. He didn’t say a single thing about the actual job, perhaps because he had every intention of rejecting us outright. So, since I’ve got an opportunity right now to observe how this shop works right now, I want to make the most of it.

“They don’t have very many things lined up for sale,” I say.

“There’s also way fewer people going in and out than at the town market. I wonder if this shop really is profitable?”

“I think it has to be. It’s very tidy, and the employees’ appearance and manner are much nicer than shops closer to the wall, I think. Since they’re so well trained and well groomed, maybe they do business with rich people or the nobility.”

Even the man standing in front of the store like a guard is dressed in better clothing than we are. That alone is proof that this shop is frequented by those who care a lot about appearance. It seems like there are many barriers that Lutz and I will have to overcome if we want to work here, since we come from such different worlds.

Da-dong, da-donnng...

The fourth bell rings through the town, telling everyone that it is now noon. At the same time, the shop’s employees start closing everything down.

“Huh? Huh?! They’re closing down?!”

I grab Lutz by the hand, then frantically run towards Benno’s shop, pulling him along behind me. If everything is closed down and everyone goes home, I’ll have no idea what to actually do. I call out to the guard as he turns to head into the shop, holding up my invitation.

“Excuse meee! The two of us were invited here by Mister Benno; would you be able to tell us what we should do next, please?”

“Ah, there’s no need to panic. I hear you, but would you mind waiting a bit until we’ve finished closing up?”

After they finish closing the shop for lunch, all of the employees head off to get some food, leaving just the one guard behind. It seems like I didn't need to call out while they were in the middle of closing the shop, I could have just greeted the guard afterward. Immediately after the shop is closed and the employees have all scattered, the guard leads us inside.

"Sir, you have guests," he says.

"Ah, show them in," comes a voice from another room.

The guard opens a door, lets us in, then closes it behind us with a respectful bow. At a single glance, it's obvious that this room is used for business discussions. The shelves around the room are lined with a variety of things that I'm not used to seeing. Behind the wooden desk at which Benno is seated are more shelves, where piles of wooden boards and scrolls have accumulated.

Are those bookshelves?!

There aren't any books, so it might be more accurate to call them document shelves, but those are shelves that are packed with writing. I start to unsteadily wander over towards them, but when Benno stands up I manage to stop myself, planting my feet firmly to the ground.

"Sorry for calling you out here on such short notice," he says. "I thought I absolutely needed to have a talk with you."

"About what, sir?"

"How about we have lunch first? We can talk afterwards."

I take the seat Benno offers me, though my line of sight to the bookshelf-like shelves is cut off. Lutz sits next to me, looking just a little bit nervous.

"I'll have it brought right in."

Benno picks up a small bell from the desk and rings it three times. A door at the back of the room opens, and a young woman comes out, bearing food on a tray. It seems like there must be a stairway to connect this floor to the second floor above.

“Maine, Lutz, welcome,” she says. “I hope you’ll enjoy your meal.”

I thought she might have been Benno’s wife, but since he didn’t introduce her at all, it could be that she’s one of his employees or perhaps a servant.

“Thank you very much,” is all I say as I study the tableware set out in front of me. We each have an empty plate, a fork, and a spoon. There isn’t a great difference between the amount of cutlery we’re using here and that I use at home; the only difference is that Benno is the only one with a knife in front of him. It seems like it’s the responsibility of Benno, the master of the house, to serve our plates. He serves salad and meat onto our plates, and gives us bowls of soup.

“Please, enjoy.”

Lutz had been trying his best in his own special way, but as soon as we start eating it seems like all of my advice immediately spills out of his head, and he starts shoving food into his face with great gusto.

Perhaps Lutz should also learn some table manners before we start working.

I pick up my fork, then start to eat. I keep an eye on Benno as I do, but it seems that his table manners aren’t much different from mine. Although I think this to be the case, for some reason Benno keeps studying me closely. I wonder if I’m making some sort of mistake? I eat timidly, nervous that I’m making some small errors that I just can’t notice. I don’t think I’m doing anything exceptionally rude, though, so I have no idea what he could be quite so focused on.

For today, at least, the manners I know tell me that leaving just a little bit of food left on the plate would show that I’m full to my satisfaction. I had been thinking that leaving any leftovers would be rude, so I kept eating, but at some point my mouth just clamped shut when I tried to eat any more.

I’d had some degree of expectation for a rich man’s lunch, but the only real difference is in the quantity, not the flavor. It seems like their cooking methods are still the same. Yet another letdown. Lutz, however, thinks

quantity is king, and looks absolutely satisfied.

“Now that our bellies are full, shall we talk?”

“Yes,” I reply.

Benno sips on some dark, coffee-like beverage with an unusual scent, and we’re given herbal tea as we start our conversation.

“First, I’d like to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you rely on Otto for that?”

Benno’s expression and tone show both irritation and a little bit of anger. Lutz draws back, and I tilt my head to the side a little.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you’re asking. I’ve always relied on Otto for many things, so to what and to when are you referring?”

“Otto told me that he’d lent you nails, and that you’d exchanged that liquid you put in your hair for it, didn’t you?”

“Yes. ...Was there a problem with that? I don’t think there was anyone else I know that I could have asked to get me nails.”

I have no idea why Benno would be upset that Otto gave me nails. Perhaps he’s upset that I gave him some shampoo? I sit there, head tilted to the side and not understanding at all. Benno lets out an enormous sigh.

“This is common sense to a merchant, but it would have been best for you to consult with me first.”

“With you, sir?”

“That’s right,” he says, with a solemn nod.

It seems like it this would indeed be common sense for a merchant of this world, but I still don’t understand it.

“But, the two of us aren’t your apprentices yet, right? I thought that making paper was going to be our test, so asking you for help seemed to me like it would be illogical.”

“Not true. If you can make that paper, then you’ll work here as an apprentice, and it’ll be a good sold through this shop. The first person you should be consulting is thus me, and not Otto.”

Although we’re still not officially apprentices, it seems that we should perhaps still be thinking of him as our superior, since we have a conditional employment agreement. I had thought that making paper was our test, but I should consider it to be an extension of our jobs. If I think of it like that, then this matter is simple: Benno’s sub-apprentices asked someone who was not him for assistance in a matter related to their work, which reflects poorly on him as a supervisor.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I understand what you mean. We damaged your reputation, or, rather, hurt your honor as our supervisor. We’ll be more careful of this in the future.”

Seeing that I’ve understood and reflected on my actions, Benno nods several times, then straightens up in his chair.

“Now then, let’s negotiate. I’m prepared to offer you all of the materials you think necessary to make paper in exchange for the manufacturing method for the liquid you use in your hair.”

“Huh? Making paper is our test to become your apprentices, isn’t it? Are you okay with supplying us like this?”

I thought that the test was to see if we could put everything together on our own. If Benno were to provide us with the materials we need, then our task suddenly becomes much easier.

“There’s no way that you could start a new industry like that when you have no tools, no manpower, and no prior investment. Still, you can’t be asking someone who, at least on the surface, has nothing to do with the project for assistance. If you had some form of collateral, you could get a loan, but you don’t have anything to offer, do you?”

It goes without saying, but Lutz and I, the children of poor people, have absolutely nothing we could use as collateral on a loan.

“Information isn’t something you could return to us when we’re

finished, so we can't use it as collateral, right?"

"That's why, in this case we're not discussing a loan, but a trade. I'm buying your recipe. In exchange, I'll provide you with everything you need to make paper. ...Surely you don't think this is a bad deal?"

"It certainly doesn't seem to be a bad one."

If we commission the custom tools we need and purchase the materials through Benno's suppliers, there's a chance the paper manufacturing method might leak out, but for someone like me, who can't even procure a single pot, getting this assistance would be like removing the noose from my neck.

"Lutz, what do you think?"

He's been sitting next to me this entire time, wordlessly listening. Making paper is both of our jobs. It wouldn't be right for me to make a decision like this without getting his input as well. However, he looks away a little bit, shaking his head.

"...Thinking about these things is your job, right? Whatever you think is fine by me."

"Really?"

If that's what Lutz thinks, then I should try to get us the best terms for this arrangement that I can. If Benno will agree to provide us with both tools and, of course, raw materials, then we can focus entirely on making the paper itself.

"I'd like to clarify something, sir. When you say you'll provide us with what we need, do you mean just the tools, or does that include the raw materials as well?"

"I don't mind if we include the materials. You want to experiment with a variety of things, correct? I heard that Lutz was asking a lumber dealer about different kinds of wood."

That's right, a merchant's broad network of connections can be terrifying. If unfamiliar children are wandering around and gathering

information, that news is of course going to immediately start to spread.

“How long will this support continue?”

“Until your baptismal ceremony. Before then, you can’t become apprentices, after all. To keep appearances, I’ll sell whatever you manage to bring me. From the gross, I’ll withhold the cost of the materials and the sale, plus a commission; the rest will be yours. After your baptisms, you’ll come to this shop to operate the paper trade, and ten percent of the net profits will be added to your wages as a bonus.”

There’s no problem with what he’s proposing for before the ceremony. We come to him with any completed paper we make, and he sells it. Even if the commission he charges is relatively high, our profits will still be assured.

However, I’m somewhat uneasy about what would happen after the ceremony. Having our share of the profits added to our wages sounds good, but, what happens if we’re dismissed? If he’s no longer paying us any wage, then it’s possible that he won’t pay us our share of the profits, either. It feels like there’s an enormous gap between the common knowledge we should have in this circumstance and the knowledge we actually have from our daily lives. If paper production goes according to plan, once its profitability is realized we don’t actually have any guarantees after that.

“In addition to the bonus to our wages, please let me retain the exclusive rights to manufacture the paper, and let Lutz retain the exclusive rights to sell it.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Once we’re able to make paper, it’s possible that you’d fire us as soon as you got your hands on the actual goods, and that would be very bad for us. I would much rather have a long-term guarantee over the chance for immediate profits.”

Benno’s eyes briefly glimmer as he strokes his chin.

“Well, looking out for yourself wasn’t bad at all. Your childish reasoning

is, however, full of holes.”

“Urgh... I’ll have to study.”

Since I still lack the necessary bits of local common sense, no matter how hard I wrack my brain, my reasoning will always still be childish.

“So, then, if we leave the rights to the paper at that, are you going to stake any claim with regards to the rights to your hair-glossing liquid?”

“No, sir, I won’t contest you for the rights to my ‘simple shampoo’. I’d be selling those to you.”

I have no intention of demanding rights to something I am trying to sell. To me, the circulation of paper is the best possible outcome, and I’d like to be able to offer Lutz’s family some kind of guarantee of his long-term success as a merchant’s apprentice, since they’re still opposed to this path.

“Well, that’s fine. The various rights relating to the manufacturing and sale of the paper will be yours. However, as long as the two of you are working here, you’ll do all of your sales through this shop. You’ll have no right to determine either the price of sale or your profits, and there will be no bonus to your wages. That should cover everything, right?”

“That sounds alright to me. This is simply just insurance, after all.”

Right now, guaranteeing a place where we can work and earn a steady wage is the most important thing. I’m fine with earning our profits slowly, over the long term. Beyond just the hairpin that first caught Benno’s eye, my recipes, and even my beauty products, I can think of quite a few things off the top of my head that I can turn into serious profits if I can first get the necessary raw materials, after all.

“Alright then. That’s all for now, then. I’ll be heading out to the noblemen’s residences for the afternoon. I’ll be back in the evening, so until then, the two of you should stay here and fill out the orders for your supplies. Write out everything you’ll need in order to make your paper.”

I’m happy with how quickly our work is progressing now, but I still haven’t learned how to write up supply orders while working at the gates.

“...If I don't know how to write a supply order?”

“I'll have someone teach you. If you're able to finish by this evening, I'll show you something nice, as a prize.”

“Something nice?”

“When you are absolutely serious about ensuring your own profits, or making deals with the nobility, there is a way of forming a contract that is almost never used outside of extremely profitable, high-stakes transactions. This isn't something either of you would have seen if you've just been doing your business in the town markets. This isn't just a verbal agreement, I'll guarantee you your rights.”

Certainly, I was hoping for a written contract, not just a verbal agreement, but I hadn't thought Benno would be the one to bring it up.

“...Why would you go that far for us, sir? Wouldn't it leave you in a better position if this were to remain a verbal agreement only?”

Benno shakes his head, smiling broadly.

“What I want is to promptly and contractually protect my rights to this 'simple shampoo'. If we simply had a verbal agreement, then it would be quite problematic for me if you were to assert your own claim on it once it started to become profitable. This contract will guarantee your own rights to the paper, in exchange for completely giving up your rights to the 'shampoo'.”

“Thank you very much.”

I wonder if he wanted to say that we shouldn't be fully trusting each other, since the two of us have only ever met twice. If we have a written contract, then both of us can rest easy.

As the employees start returning from their lunch break one by one, Benno appoints one person to serve as our teacher for the afternoon. The prim aura of a butler practically rolls off of him, so heavily that I instinctively want to call him Sebastian.¹

“Mark, this is Maine and Lutz. Please teach them how to write up a

materials order. I'll leave them in your care until I'm back."

"Very well, Master Benno," he replies.

Benno gives further directions to the other employees as he gets ready to leave. As he heads out the door, he stops briefly and turns his head to call out to Mark.

"Ah, I almost forgot. Mark, while I'm out, get everything set up for the contract magic."

Contract magic?

I think I heard him correctly.

Huh? Was this... a fantasy... setting?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. "Sebastian" is the name of the title character from the anime Black Butler. He is a butler.

Chapter 30: Contract Magic

At Mark's request, one of the female employees clears off the table in front of us. As she does so, he brings over a platter, bearing various things. It might be more accurate to call the thing he's holding a "tray", but since he's so incredibly butler-like, it's difficult to refer to the round, flat, wooden disk as anything but a platter.

Mark sets out the objects he brought on the table in front of us: a number of thin boards, a pot of ink, some kind of pen made from something like bamboo or reed, a slate, a slate pencil, and a cloth. He lines them up perfectly, without the slightest bend in the line, then looks up at us.

"Now then, I shall teach you how to write a materials order."

"Thank you very much," I reply.

"Th... thank you," mumbles Lutz.

Mark glances back and forth between the two of us, comparing us.

"Lutz, are you able to write?"

"...I can just write my name."

It seems that Lutz has held on to the name-writing lesson I taught him back when we were making clay tablets. However, the writing we'll need to do here isn't just limited to one's own name, so he turns away to hide an embarrassed expression. Mark nods once, with a thoughtful hum, then picks up the slate and places it neatly in front of Lutz.

"You say that you are able to write your name? I had heard that you were not the children of merchants, so... you've surprised me. You'll have no problems with the contract. However, if you were to work as an apprentice here, you would be expected to know how to write every letter. While Maine and I work on preparing the materials order, why don't we have you practice writing some basic letters?"

It seems that Mark had thought Lutz, having not come from a merchant family, wouldn't be able to write his own name, and had planned on

having him learn how so that he could sign the contract. Changing his plans, he writes five or so letters on top of the slate, and has Lutz start practicing those. I wonder if he's in charge of teaching the apprentices how to write? He seems very used to this teaching method.

"Maine, are you able to write?"

"There are definitely words that I won't know, but if you can teach me those, I'll be able to write them."

"Very well."

Mark places two boards in front of me, one with nothing written on it at all, and one that already has some things on it. Some sort of copybook, perhaps. There are a few words I don't understand, but I can read about seventy percents of it.

"This reads 'order for goods'," he says, indicating the words at the very top. He also teaches me about the general format of the document. Once he shows me the words for "ordering proprietor", "goods requested", and "quantity requested", the rest of it is not particularly difficult.

"Now then, do you know what materials and tools you need to order?"

"Yes, sir."

With a big nod, I start to write. The board clatters as I write on it, though, making it harder than I thought it was going to be. On top of that, this unfamiliar pen is very difficult to write with, making this rather unpleasant. Compared to a pen like this, the soot pencils I made were far easier to write with, although the letters did crumble and smudge into an illegible mess of black at the slightest touch.

"Urgh," I say, "this is so different from writing on a slate."

"You're doing very well for your first time," says Mark.

Being praised like that lifts my spirits, and I press on. As my pen slides crisply across the board, Mark looks over my shoulder at what I'm ordering, frowning slightly.

"...Maine, we can purchase a pot, but how big do you need it to be?"

“Ummm... I think one the same size as the second-biggest one we have at my house would be okay, but...”

Mark’s frown deepens. It’s clear to see that my explanation did nothing to clear things up for him.

Right, I see. There’s no way he’d know what I meant when I’d talk about my family’s pots, right? However, I have no idea how to express the size of the pot I want. I don’t think they use centimeters here, so how should I explain it?

“Hey, Lutz,” I say. “About how big is the pot you use to carry water?”

“Hm? Oh, um... about this big,” he says, making a circle with his arms.

After I pass the buck completely to a little kid... ahem, ahem, I mean, after I ask Lutz, the most knowledgable expert on the matter for his opinion, Mark immediately takes out something like a tape measure and quickly measures the circle Lutz has made.

“And its depth?” he asks.

“Lutz, how deep is it?”

“About this deep,” says Lutz, spreading out his hands. Again, Mark takes a quick measurement.

Since there’s never been any sort of measuring device around, until now I’ve been doing all of my measurement by eye. There’s never been any need for anything precise. However, although that might be fine when we’re making things on our own, when we’re placing orders for other people to fill, that kind of ambiguity is unacceptable. I hold my head in my hands, and let out a small groan.

I raise my hand, looking at Mark. “...Mister Mark, before I write out this order, would you please teach me the units of measurement for length?”

“Of course,” he replies.

“Also, after we leave today, we won’t be able to place any more orders since we don’t have any way to make measurements ourselves. Could you lend us a measuring tape?”

If we can't measure the frame that we've already built, we can't make the paper mat.

"Let us order a tape measure for you as well. It seems like you'll be needing one now."

When we're making trial runs in order to determine things like the types of wood we'll need and the mixing ratios we'll be using, we'll be making postcard-sized sheets. However, when we've managed to perfect it, we'll be making much larger sheets. When we do, we will, of course, need larger tools. A measuring device is necessary.

Mark lends me a measuring tape. As he explains how to use it, I start working on writing out the order.

Steamer, pot, squared timber, ashes, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, flat board. Also, raw wood and sunset hibiscus sap.

Since I want to start making paper as soon as I can, I want to list out absolutely everything right now, but until we actually get our pot, I don't know how big the steamer will need to be. And, if we don't know how big the steamer will be, we don't know how large the wood we'll need the wood to be, either.

I describe the squared timber to Mark and explain how it's used, and we decide how large and heavy it will need to be. For the ashes, we don't know how much we'll need until we actually try making paper, so for now we order a small bag of it. For the rest of what we need, I wrack my brain madly, trying to figure out how best to explain it.

"Aaargh, this is hard. For the paper mat, I actually want to bring the frame we've already made directly to the craftsman and talk with him myself."

"I agree," replies Mark. "I'm not entirely certain what would serve well as this paper mat that you describe. Even after looking at this diagram you've drawn for me, I still don't quite understand it."

Aside from the paper mat, which made even Mark give up, we somehow manage to get everything else written into an order.

As I've been grappling with this supply order, Lutz has been valiantly practicing his letters. I'm actually shocked to see that, even though I'm fairly certain he's not used to sitting down and working for long periods like this, he's showing an amazing ability to concentrate. This is very different from the apprentice soldiers that came to study at the gates. It's only natural, though: of course you'll be able to concentrate harder on something you think is important to you.

However, Lutz's facial expression is completely blank. I wonder if he's been pushing himself too hard?

"Now then, since we still have some time remaining, how about you learn how to calculate? Here, we add our sums using calculators like this."

After taking a brief break, Mark starts instructing Lutz in how to use a calculator. Since I don't how to use calculators in this world either, I sit next to him, watching and listening as well. As I mentally compare this simple device with an abacus, Mark briefly pauses his explanation and looks at me, head cocked slightly to one side in curiosity.

"Maine, aren't you already able to do calculations? I have heard as much from the master."

"Oh, I, don't actually use a calculator."

"Then, how do you perform your calculations?"

"I do them on my slate."

On my slate, I start working out by hand the calculations Mark gives me. He calls my ability to work out large out large sums unbelievable, so, somehow, I wind up teaching him a little bit about how to do complex calculations by hand.

"If you have a calculator," he says, "you wouldn't need to know how to 'work things out by hand', as you call it, correct?"

"There are times when you don't have a calculator, and it's useful then. Also, though I can see how you use a calculator, I don't actually know how it produces those numbers. It's very interesting to me."

I marvel at Mark, who seems completely mystified by an arithmetic lesson usually reserved for elementary school students. The things I think of as completely obvious aren't completely obvious at all. Once again, I'm struck by how awesome Japan's public education system is.

Maybe it would be a good idea to not spread around this kind of thing too much?

In my view, sharing knowledge is a good thing, but I don't know if that meshes well with how things are commonly done in this world. Perhaps I've gone a little bit overboard, this time.

"It's almost time for the master to return. I'll start making arrangements for the contract magic."

"What's 'contract magic'?"

I can't stop my heart from pounding when I hear those words, the first fantasy-sounding thing I've heard since coming here. I had never even considered that a world as filthy and unpleasant as this one could possibly contain something as fantastical as magic.

Could I maybe use magic too? Is that my reincarnation-story-protagonist cheat?! Exhilarated, I sit on the edge of my seat, waiting for Mark's answer.

He chuckles at me. "Magic, as you know, is something that only the nobility possess."

"...Only the nobility?"

"Yes, that's right. Since it's so rare for people like us to see, it's not something that we understand very well."

In an instant, my joy at having found myself in a fantasy world is smashed to bits.

Only the nobility have magic? What the hell. They're not just keeping books from me, but magic too? Those damn aristocrats.

"Contract magic was originally created as a way to keep the more violent noblemen in check. To perform it, you need a special ink and paper. If you write and execute a contract with those, then you'll be bound to the terms

of the contract by magic. It's a powerful way to ensure that neither party breaks the terms of their agreement."

"Huhhh, that really is convenient."

A contract, guaranteed by magic, that can't just be torn up and ignored seems very useful indeed.

"It's convenient, but the paper and ink are magic tools, and are thus both very rare and very expensive, so it isn't used except for the most profitable contracts."

I see. Somehow, it seems that Benno sees a tremendous amount of profit in my simple shampoo.

Certainly, consumable products have that kind of power. If you run out of them, then you'll need to get more. I can't imagine a woman out there who would ever let their supply run out once they got used to having glossy, silky hair. This is doubly true for those women with money, like the noblewomen who put so much effort into their appearances.

...Did I perhaps sell this for too cheaply?

As soon as that thought flashes through my head, I remember that it's not good to be too greedy. What Lutz and I need are security, stability, and a firm financial footing. I should focus on securing that.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," says Benno, walking quickly as he walks through the door of the shop. It seems like he was actually concerned about how long we were waiting.

"Are you finished with the materials order?"

"We've written up what we can for now."

I indicate the pile of boards that we've accumulated behind me. "That's a lot," he murmurs. There's still stuff we need to measure, Benno, so there'll be even more soon. We're counting on you.

"How is Lutz doing?" asks Benno.

Mark proudly places his hand on his chest as he answers. "He was already able to write his name when we began, so ever since then he has

been devoted to learning how to write beyond that. This young man has an excellent memory.”

“Ah, I see.”

Even though Mark is praising him, Lutz only manages a small nod of acknowledgement, as if there’s something big on his mind. He’s spent a full half of a day studying, so it’s likely that he’s quite tired by now. Doing something you’re not used to is very exhausting, after all.

“Mark must have explained this by now, but for this contract magic we use a paper specifically used for contracts and a special kind of ink. This is something that only merchants who’ve been approved to work with the nobility can use.”

Benno takes out a small ink bottle with a peculiar design. At a glance, it looks like it contains regular ink, but it seems like it must be something completely different. As I watch him intently, Benno neatly spreads the blank contract out on the table in front of him.

“...Is it okay for you to be using that? It looks very rare and expensive.”

“I wouldn’t be using it if I didn’t think this was a very important contract. Don’t worry about it.”

...If you tell me not to worry about it, I’ll worry about it.

Benno dips a pen into the inkwell, then smoothly begins to write out the terms of the contract. The ink is actually not black, but a rich blue. As Benno fills the page with neat, practiced handwriting, I follow along closely.

Maine agrees to transfer all rights to her Simple Shampoo to Benno.

In exchange, Benno agrees to assume all costs of the paper-making enterprise to be undertaken by Maine and Lutz, until the date of their baptismal ceremony.

Maine will retain all rights relating to the manufacturing of the paper, and Lutz will retain all rights to the sale of the paper.

However, they will retain neither the right set the sales price of the

paper, nor the right determine their profits.

Maine carefully reads the contents of the contract from end to end, verifying that nothing strange has been written. This, however, is only a pretense. In reality, I'm taking this time to deeply inhale the intoxicating scent of fresh ink on paper.

Aaah, I want to make paper, then make books, so badly...

"...Is there some sort of problem?" asks Benno, incredulously.

With a sigh, I come back to my senses. I turn to face a suspicious Benno and an amazed Lutz. I think Lutz might have realized that I was captivated by the smell of the ink.

"Wha?! Ev... everything looks fine! You've written things out just like we talked about them, so there's no problems."

"...I'm fine, too," says Lutz.

Benno nods, then dips the pen into the inkwell once more.

At the bottom of the contract, Benno signs his name. He spins the pen around and offers it to me. I exchange a brief glance with Lutz, then accept it.

I run a finger across the parchment. It's so much softer than the paper I'm used to. Satisfied, I adjust my grip on the pen. I carefully dip it into the inkwell, letting the nib absorb just enough ink so that a tiny bead forms on its tip. I sign my name just beneath Benno's. Unlike writing on those wooden boards, this is a very pleasant surface to write on.

Writing on paper feels far better than those boards, after all...

"Your turn, Lutz."

Lips pressed together in concentration, Lutz takes the pen from me, dips the pen in the inkwell, and writes his name below mine. The blockiness of his handwriting betrays how unused to writing he is, but he still writes his name clearly and legibly.

"Now then..."

“Aaah! Mister Benno?!”

Benno abruptly pulls out a knife and slashes open his own finger. As Lutz and I watch on, startled, a drop of blood wells up on his fingertip. He smears it onto another finger, then presses down on top of his signature, sealing it with his blood. As he presses his finger tightly to the contract, the bright red blood is absorbed into the paper. In that instant, the blue ink of his signature abruptly turns deep black.

This is some scary magic, yikes!

“Right, and next is...”

Benno looks over at me. I’m paralyzed with fear, staring at the bright red drop of blood that lingers on Benno’s knife. Lutz looks over at me, sighs, then takes out his own knife.

“Give me your hand, Maine...”

“Eek!”

I shove my hands behind my back without thinking about it at all.

“Maine, you can’t do it yourself, right?”

“Th... that’s right, but...”

Cutting open my own finger is scary, but having someone else do it is scary too. I really hate pain.

“Whose idea was it to make this contract?” he says, patiently.

“M... mine...”

Steeling myself, I close my eyes tightly, then timidly extend my hands. Quickly, Lutz deftly slices open the tip of my left pinky. Blood starts to trickle down my finger, accompanied by a sharp, hot, stinging pain.

“Spread that blood to your thumb, then press it into the contract,” says Benno.

“Nnngh... guh!”

Trying very hard not to cry, I smear some blood on my thumb, then press it firmly onto the contract, where I’ve signed it. Just like Benno’s, the ink

immediately turns pitch black. While Mark stops the bleeding and wraps a small cloth around my pinky, Lutz unhesitatingly cuts open his own finger and leaves his own bloody seal on the contract.

How can he do that without even flinching?! Isn't that scary?!

As soon as Lutz's hand leaves the paper, the ink of the contract shines with a brilliant light, as if it's burning. Spreading from the ink itself, a hole opens up in space, then snaps shut, taking the entire sheet of parchment with it. Even though I saw it happen right in front of my very own eyes, I can't help but think it's exactly like some CG you'd find in a movie.

...Wow, this really is fantasy. I can't believe that I've been living in a fantasy world!

As I marvel over this strange new way of signing a contract, I suddenly notice that the contract has completely disappeared, and snap back to my senses.

Aren't I supposed to get a copy of this?

"And, with that, the contract is complete. Violating it is a deadly matter, so don't do it, okay?"

"Deadly?!" I shout, terrified by his dreadful words.

He looks down at me with a broad, amused smile. "Well, if you don't violate it, you'll do just fine. But, this is the kind of guarantee you wanted, isn't it?"

"...Thank you very much," I say. "I'm very grateful."

In the end, I didn't get a copy for myself.

With the contract magic complete, Lutz and I leave Benno's shop. By now, the sun is quite low in the sky, and I watch it slowly sink towards the horizon, its golden hue gradually dimming to red. Lutz and I walk back the way we came, through streets that seem so different in the evening glow.

"It's later than I thought," I say. "Let's get home quickly."

The people around us seem to be in a hurry to get home as well, walking with a bit of extra speed. As we're carried along by the wave of traffic, I

turn to Lutz.

“Today was super exhausting, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

There’s still more material orders for us to write up, but, the orders that I spent so much time filling out today are going to be processed, we’ll get our materials, and we’ll be able to devote ourselves solely to making paper. On top of that, the contract magic means that Lutz and I have guaranteed our rights. When we finish perfecting our paper, we won’t get abruptly fired from the shop.

“Now, we just need to make this paper, then we’re totally secure, Lutz!”

“...Mm.”

Lutz’s tongue is so heavy that I can barely hear his response before it disappears amongst the noise of the crowd. Usually, we talk a lot as we walk, to distract from the fact that I’m so slow. I wonder why his responses are so dull right now.

I wonder if this wore him out more than going to the forest? Maybe memorizing letters and learning how to do calculations doesn’t really agree with him?

I look over at Lutz as he walks beside me. His blond hair glows a brilliant red in the evening sun. As I look up at him, though, I can’t really make out the expression on his face through the shadow that falls across it.

“Hey, Lutz. What’s wrong?”

Even though I ask, Lutz doesn’t reply. He opens his mouth a little, looking like he almost wants to say something, but he immediately snaps it tightly shut. He hangs his head a little, as if he’s brooding over something. Like that, we walk in silence for a while.

Lutz always slows down for me, acting like my pace-setter. I wonder if we’re walking at Lutz’s natural speed right now? I’m almost having to jog to keep up. He’s acting so differently compared to how he normally is. I’m

getting a very bad feeling about this.

“Wait, Lutz.”

We stop in the central plaza, and Lutz immediately turns to look away from me. He presses his lips tightly together, then turns to look at me. His face, half-shrouded in shadow from the evening sun, is deadly serious. Looking like he’s gathered all of his resolve, he opens his mouth, and speaks in a cracked voice.

“You... you’re Maine, right?”

“Huh?”

My breath catches in my throat. In an instant, all the blood in my body turns ice cold, and a heavy weight clamps down on my heart. The sounds of the bustling plaza fade away, replaced by a deafening ringing in my ears, pounding with each rush of blood through my veins.

“If you’re really Maine, then... how could you talk like that?”

“Like how?”

“Like how you talked to the shopkeeper today. I didn’t even understand half of it. Hearing Maine talk about things I don’t know anything about, and keeping up with an adult... it’s strange.”

The ringing in my ears continues. I gulp nervously as I listen to him.

“Hey. You’re really Maine, right?” he says, looking for confirmation.

I force down the prickling in my throat. I tilt my head way over to the side doubtfully, pretending like I have absolutely no idea what he’s talking about it.

“Well, um... Lutz, do I look like I’m not Maine?”

“...My bad. That was a weird thing to say. ...I was just a little surprised to see you talking like an adult.”

Lutz manages to put something like a smile on his face, then starts walking again.

I stand there, mutely, strange thoughts turning over in my head. When I

notice Lutz's figure slowly growing smaller in the distance, I start moving forward as well.

...I messed up, didn't I.

That's right. I haven't interacted with very many people so far. Since I don't have any strength or stamina, I haven't been useful for much of anything. I've been working as Otto's assistant, but for that, I've been at most a child that's uncommonly good at calculations, and none of the kids I know ever come in contact with me while I'm there.

What I've done with Lutz has basically just been making clay tablets and carving wood. Even if my motives were strange, that's still something a child could actually do, so my doing so wouldn't be particularly suspicious.

However, today I showed off a speaking ability as good as Benno's, and fought very hard to secure a position for me and Lutz. I fought too hard. I'm sure that Lutz didn't see in me today a trace of the weak, frail Maine that he has to protect from everything.

As we start making paper in earnest, the number of arguments with adults I'll need to have is only going to increase. When we're having tools made for us, I'm going to need to be able to lay out proposals and give clear directions. I'm going to have to do more and more un-childlike things, but this is what I have to do in order to obtain paper for myself.

I'm going to drift farther and farther away from the Maine that Lutz knows, I think. As Lutz and I work together, he's only going to grow more and more convinced that I'm not actually Maine. This isn't that far off.

What would Lutz think if he knew this?

What should I, who am not Maine, do now?

As we return home, Lutz's face is hidden in the shadows of twilight. I can't bring myself to walk at his side.

Chapter 31: Lutz's Most Important Duty

Even long after we've returned home, Lutz's words tumble around in my head. It looked like they were hard for him to say, but the fact that he was able to say them so clearly means that he holds some significant doubts in his heart.

What would he say if he knew I really wasn't Maine?

"Give Maine back," he would scream, "it's your fault she's gone!", mixing his confusion, his anger, his fear into a deluge of verbal abuse. And if he tells my family about it, then I'd suddenly have nowhere to belong.

I'd be driven from my home or even, in the worst case, subjected to this world's equivalent of a witch hunt. Their religion may tell them that I've been possessed by a demon, so they'll torture, maim, and kill me.

I shiver as all of the things I've read about witch hunts and the tortures they involve flicker through my head.

...I hate painful things. I hate scary things. If it looked like I was going to be tortured, I think I'd want to die instead.

Getting driven out or getting tortured would both be terrible, but before that happens, I could just let myself be swallowed up by my fever. The only pain there would be whatever would seep through the feverish delirium as I died. I have a simple way to throw away my life at a single though without anyone being able to say otherwise.

I'd rather die than be tortured.

It's hasty, but being carried away by fever sounds way more comfortable than being tortured. When I think about it like that, I can breathe just a little bit easier.

On top of that, now that I'm thinking about it, what made me fight back against the fever and struggle to remain in this world was the fact that I'd made a promise to Lutz. I told myself that I had a promise to keep, and drove my fever away.

I apologized to him, then introduced him to Otto, so I think I can

tentatively say that I no longer have any regrets. After meeting with Benno and seeing that making paper is almost in my grasp, I realized that I wanted to make paper, and wanted to make books, but I don't actually have any particular attachment to anything else in this world.

It would be very simple for Lutz to avoid the me who is not Maine if I disgust him, but if he does that, then the paper-making project won't succeed. If I can explain things clearly, then I think it's likely that Lutz will come along quietly until we finish making paper and finish getting hired as apprentice merchants.

If I can somehow manage to keep things together until we successfully make some paper, then I can die whenever I want.

Now that I've prepared myself for that, I feel much more at ease. It's not the most conclusive conclusion I've come up with, but it's the best compromise I've come up with.

I don't particularly care when it's time for me to die, but if I want to die without any regrets at all, I need to focus all of my efforts into making paper.

I may have said that I've prepared myself for the worst, but that doesn't mean that I have no reluctance at all to meet with Lutz again. The next morning, I meet him outside, just a little bit nervous.

"I'm going to the forest today," he says. "I've got to bring back a bunch of firewood."

My face lights up when I hear him say that. Today, I have to head to Benno's shop to write up the remaining material orders and instruct him in the manufacturing process for my simple shampoo. If Lutz isn't going to be there, this is the chance to get as many of the suspicious things that I need to do out of the way now, buying me some time.

"Got it," I reply. "I'm going to Benno's shop today. I need to place the order for the paper mat, and I'm going to need to talk with him about where our supplies are going to be delivered."

"...You're going by yourself?"

“Yeah, I think so...?”

If Lutz can't come with me, then I've got no choice to go alone today. Plus, since today's primary order of business will be to dealing with adults, then it's very convenient if nobody I'm particularly close to is there today.

“...You're able to go by yourself?”

“Oh, I'm all right.”

Lutz clenches his fist tightly, looking like he wants to say something. However, he heads off to the forest without saying anything but “see you”.

I've been to Benno's shop once. Twice, if you include when I went to Otto's home. Going there by myself shouldn't be any trouble at all. Carrying my slate, slate pencils, and set of material forms with me in my tote bag, I set off for Benno's shop.

Alright, so! Let's get as many things out of the way as I possibly can today!

“Good morning,” I say as I enter the shop. Merchant's bustle about frantically, and customers constantly stream in and out of the shop. I make a beeline straight for Mark, the only person whose face I know. “Ah, Mister Mark! Would Mister Benno happen to be in? I've brought some more order forms with me.”

“The master is busy right now, so I'd be happy to take them from you.”

I pull out the set of order forms from my bag and place them in his outstretched hand, along with the ink and measuring tape he lent me.

“I've filled out these orders, but as I mentioned yesterday, if possible I'd like to explain how I'd like them to be made. Would it be possible for us to decide on the best day to do so now?”

“The lumber dealer will be more free during the morning. How about we head there now?”

“Is that okay?” I ask. “The shop's so busy, though.”

Mark looks around the room at the other employees as they deal with customer after customer streaming through the shop. His mouth turns up

into a smile, much like Otto's, emanating a hint of a black aura.

"The employees here are very well trained; I'm sure nobody would shed a tear if I were to step out for a moment."

There are a few of them that look like they're on the verge of tears already, though?

"Also," he continues, "as Master Benno told me, your requests are a special case. I do not have anything else I need to be doing at the moment, so he has determined that I am well-suited to assist you in this. Please, do not worry about me."

"Ummm, then, thank you for helping!"

Mark and I head out from the shop. It seems that the lumberyard we're heading to is near the west gate, where the town market is. Since the west gate is close to the river, most large goods are brought in through there. It's probably a very convenient place for a lumber dealer to set up his shop.

"I had some things that I was hoping to ask Mister Benno, but since it seems that he's busy, may I ask you instead, Mister Mark?"

"What is it?"

As we walk along the main road towards the central plaza, I start to ask about the things I wasn't able to while we were in the store.

"I was hoping that you could lend us a storehouse or workshop that we could use to store the materials we've ordered."

It's all well and good that we can place order after order for whatever we need, but we have no place to put any of it.

Mark blinks. "Where had you been planning to work before?" he asks, as if he hadn't even considered the possibility that we didn't already have a workshop.

"We were planning on splitting storing the tools between our two houses, and then we were going to bring everything either to the well or to the river in the forest to work..."

Originally, when we were planning on borrowing a pot from our families, we figured that we could essentially find substitutes for whatever we needed either in our houses or in the forest. We were thinking that we'd be able to beg our mothers for the ashes we'd need, and in the forest we'd be able to cut and then immediately use any wood we'd need.

If we don't have to substitute things, we save a lot of time and effort, but the sheer amount of baggage we'll have immediately increases. We'll also have a lot more raw material to store, beyond just what we'd be using in a single day. However, neither Lutz's home nor mine has very much extra space in it, so I don't think that either of our families would let us store a bunch of stuff not actually necessary for daily life in there.

"There's a limit to what we can store between the two of us," I explain, "and it's difficult to work like that. It would be best if we could borrow a workshop, so I thought I should ask you about it, since there's nothing to lose. Wouldn't you say this is also part of your initial investment?"

As I talk, Mark rubs his temples, muttering about how unbelievable this is.

"You were planning to do something much more unreasonable than I'd originally thought," he says.

"We haven't had the support of any adults so far," I remind him.

There's only so much that children can do without the cooperation of adults. Now that I've traded my simple shampoo for Benno's support, I fully intend to use it to its maximum potential. If I let this opportunity slip, I don't think I'll have a second chance to try to make paper, so I can't let things like restraint or discretion hold me back.

"Hmm, I'll see what I can do to secure a storehouse for you."

"Thank you very much. With you on our side, Mister Mark, I have a feeling we'll definitely be able to get a storehouse for sure."

Based on what I saw last time, I think Mark might be something like Benno's second-in-command or right-hand man. (Because he looks so butler-y.) If Mark is the one doing the negotiating, there's no problem at

all. He'll definitely be able to get us a storehouse.

"Do you have any special requirements for the storehouse?"

"Ummm, since there are a lot of things that we're going to need to go to the forest to do, it would be nice if it could be near the south gate. Besides that, as long as it has a roof and can hold the things we're ordering, anything is good."

"I understand. ...Ah, there they are. That lumberyard over there."

He points at something ahead of him, but at my height, I can't see anything. I try hopping up and down, but I still can't see over the crowds. I grab his hand and quicken my pace.

"Right, let's hurry!"

Exuberantly, I turn towards where Mark is pointing, and break into a bit of a jog. In the next instant, my knees collapse, and my consciousness smash-cuts to black.

When I come to, I'm in a completely unfamiliar room.

Thanks to the thick covers of the bed I'm in, there's no prickling from the straw mattress beneath me. It's a very nice, comfortable bed. The ceiling is simple, but it's been carefully kept clean. I don't recognize it at all.

"...Where, am I?"

I sit up in bed and look around. Nearby, I see Corinna, working on some needlework. When she hears my voice, she stops working and immediately runs over to me.

"Maine, you're awake? Benno came in carrying you, saying that you'd suddenly collapsed in the street. I was so surprised! I heard from Otto that you used to not even be able to walk to even walk to the gate in the morning without having to rest until noon, so since you didn't have a fever I thought you must just be tired and I let you sleep here for a while."

"Th... thank you very much for your care, ma'am! I am very sorry for the inconvenience!"

Eek! On top of the bed, I breathlessly prostrate myself before her in apology.¹ It seems like I collapsed in a heap on the way to the lumberyard, so I was carried here to Corinna's house thanks to Benno. I've really imposed heavily on these people. If my mother or Tory hear about this, there will be no end to their scolding.

Aaaaaargh, I need to deeply apologize to Mark too! I'm sure he must have had a heart attack when I spontaneously collapsed in the middle of an ordinary conversation.

I think I now know why I collapsed. First, I didn't get very much sleep last night, since I stayed up far too late brooding over Lutz's words. Then, I got a little bit overenthusiastic when I decided to finish as much of the negotiations as possible today when Lutz wasn't around. On top of that, since it looks like my paper-making is starting to go really well, I've been so inspired that I haven't actually been paying attention to the condition of my own body. And, since I didn't have anybody near me to pay attention to my health for me, I didn't have anyone to stop me from overdoing it.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is extremely weak. My body is a real piece of junk.

"Maine, what are you doing? You don't need to apologize for that. I'll go contact my brother. I wanted to let your family know as well, but it seems that they weren't around..."

Today, I don't think anyone should be at home, so it's only natural that they'd be hard to get hold of. On top of that, my family thinks that Lutz is out there with me. I don't think they would have even imagined that I'd go out to Benno's shop by myself, then just spontaneously collapse. Just imagining my father, so worried that he flies into a rage, is terrifying to the point where I don't even want to imagine the magnitude of my mother's wrath when she finds out how much I've inconvenienced Corinna.

"Ummm, Miss Corinna. C... can you please keep this a secret from my family?"

"Maine...?"

"My family thinks that I'm out with Lutz right now, so they'll get really

angry at him...”

I try to use Lutz as a shield to negotiate an escape from my family’s wrath, but Corinna only smiles, a smile so sweetly radiant that it’s almost like that of a goddess.

“Now, now, they’ll get mad at you anyway.”

“Noooooooo.....”

As I’m assaulted by expectations of how awful my scolding is going to be, loud footsteps approach before Benno bursts into the room. His reddish-brown eyes narrow sharply as he glares at me.

“Little girl,” he says, in a low voice.

“Fwah!!”

With a snap, I sit up perfectly straight, kneeling on the bed.

“You took some years off my life, there.”

It feels like my lifespan is being eroded away by his threatening glare. All my conditioning takes over, and bow down, pressing my forehead into the mattress.

“I am extremely sorry and beg your forgiveness!”

“...What are you doing?”

“This is a ‘dogeza’, how I show that my apology is of the utmost sincerity!”

“Ah, I see.”

He sits down next to me on the bed, ruffling his milk tea-colored hair as he scratches his head.

“I’d heard a bit from Otto about how frail you were, but I had no idea it was this bad.”

“Neither did I,” I reply.

“Hm?”

I got greedy, thinking that I could somehow manage to get by without

Lutz there. When I decided that I'd be fine if I was only doing this much, I was unconsciously judging things based on my old body. Since I'm in Maine's body now, it's only natural that I'd collapse.

"The problem was that I thought I could do anything, as long as I had the drive to do it."

"Well, okay," he mutters to himself, turning to look at me. "From now on, only come here with that kid. I won't approve if you go out alone again."

"...Yes, sir."

I didn't expect that I'd collapse just because I didn't have Lutz nearby to serve as my pacemaker. I figured that since I am now able to make it all the way to the forest under my own power, then I'd be fine walking anywhere as long I was in town. I made too light of my situation.

"Go home for today. Mark's worried about you, so take him with you."

My eyes go wide. "Umm?! That's too much for me to ask. I need to apologize to him and then I can go home by myself!"

I wave my hands frantically, trying to refuse. I couldn't possibly impose on Mark any more than I have already. However, Benno's face goes tight, and he glares at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Didn't I just say I don't approve of you going out alone? Did you hear me the first time?"

"...Yes, I did. I understand. I'll go home with Mark, even if it upsets him. Ummm, but, since I've finally managed to see you, I'd like to tell you about how to make my 'simple'—"

As I open my mouth to try and explain my main reason for coming here today, Benno grabs my head in one hand, a terrible look on his face.

"Now! Lis! Ten! Here!"

"Yes?!"

"I, told, you, to go home!"

“Eeek!”

As he yells at me, my head firmly in his grip, I tremble in fear. Tears well up in my eyes on reflex as I look up at him, but in the recesses of my mind, a dispassionate thought comes to life. Ah, I see. This is what truly being yelled at is like.

“From now on, you are prohibited from entering my shop without that boy with you! If your memory works at all, remember this!”

“I got it! I’ll remember! Ow! Owowowowow!!”

After that, I had a bit of a discussion with Mark about whether I could walk home or whether he’d carry me, but he first said, kindly, “I don’t want my heart to stop like that again, so please come along quietly,” then, when I tried to insist on walking, he asked, “did your apology just now mean nothing?” and I decided there was no way I would win.

Giving up my futile resistance, I allowed Mark to pick me up, and was carried home. When we got to my home, my family saw me being carried by Mark and extracted a report of my actions for the day from him and, as I expected, they got angry. In the middle of their enormous lecture, my fever flared up with full force, and I was stuck in bed for two more days.

“So, basically, since I was such a hindrance and made everyone so mad, please come with me to the shop today.”

The day after my fever subsided, I explain my circumstances to Lutz, and ask if he’d accompany me to the shop. He stares at me, completely stunned, then lets out a huge, huge sigh.

“Haaahhh~... Didn’t I tell you? I asked if you really could make it there, and you said it was okay. That wasn’t okay at all, was it?”

“Is... is, uh, is that what you meant? I was thinking you were asking if I remembered how to get there... Lutz?!”

“Ahahaha! What kind of crazy world do you live in that you’d think that’s what I meant? I’m always thinking about your health, aren’t I?!”

I pout at Lutz, lips pursed, as he bends over in riotous laughter. He looks

up at me, smiling so wide that it looks like his face might break.

“If you’re collapsing like that, you really shouldn’t go there without me,” he says.

“Yeah. Mister Benno actually banned me from entering his shop if I don’t have you there too.”

“Ahahaha! You got banned?!”

I’ve been reminded of just how useless I am, so I’m feeling rather depressed right now, but for some reason Lutz is in an excellent mood. I’m glad he’s not in a bad mood, but I kind of want an explanation.

I’d stayed up so late, worrying so much about what he’d said, and I thought that seeing him again was going to be so difficult, so why is he acting like he always does?!

“Hey, Maine. Stop sulking, let’s get out of here.”

Just like always, Lutz starts acting like my big brother, pulling me along as we start walking towards Benno’s shop.

“Lutz, what did you get when you went to the forest the other day?”

“Firewood and some bamboo. Didn’t you say that you wanted to whittle some bamboo down into something so that you could show it to some craftsmen?”

“Now that you say it, I did. I forgot!”

After Mark wasn’t able to understand what I was talking about, no matter how I described it or how many diagrams I drew on my slate, we’d decided that Lutz and I should come up with a physical example. I’d completely forgotten.

“Hey, hey, keep it together!”

“Lutz, you’re here to keep it together for me, so everything’s just fine.”

In a world without notebooks, there’s no way I can remember literally everything. I’m a notebook fiend. I used to always carry a notebook with me, and write down literally everything so that I wouldn’t forget it. If I

took good enough notes, it wouldn't matter if I couldn't remember something, so I guess I became so reliant on always having my notes on hand that my memory might actually have been pretty bad.

As I tell him that we're not going to forget anything if we've got each other, Lutz suddenly looks like he's almost about to cry.

"...Um, Maine, when I saw that you're so good at writing, and that you can do all that math, and that you can talk with the adults about all those things I don't understand, I got really sad."

"Huh?"

"I started thinking, what am I really good for? Like, maybe I'm not going to be any help in that shop at all."

There's no way that anyone in that shop would expect a kid who hasn't even been baptized to be immediately useful. Lutz can already write his name, and he studied very hard, so I'm sure they think highly of him. It seems like he didn't notice that at all, and was only depressing himself by comparing himself to me.

As I console him, telling him that there's no need to compare himself to me so much, he looks up at me, smiling just a little bit.

"But hey, Maine, you collapse a lot, and even though you're really smart you forget things, and you're not strong at all, and you're really tiny, and now that I think about it there's a lot of things that you actually can't do. Like, you're even banned from going to that shop without me there too..."

"That's so mean! There's some things I can do, you know!"

As I protest the way he's describing me, for whatever reason he clutches his stomach, nearly falling over as he's laughing so hard. He calms down after a while, then puts his hand on my head, ruffling my hair.

"The other day, when I said that you weren't really Maine, that was really mean of me. I'm sorry."

"...Oh. You were being... mean."

That's kind of deflating. I took Lutz's words so unbelievably seriously,

but it seems like he was just being mean. The lingering threads of tension that coiled around me suddenly slacken.

“...I thought you really hated me, I’m so glad...”

“Nah, I don’t hate you. Hey, let’s keep moving!”

I take Lutz’s outstretched hand, and we walk together down the street. My usual daily life feels like it’s coming back around.

“Good morning,” I say, as we enter the shop.

Mark looks up as we enter, then leads us to the back of the shop, where Benno is. He looks up at us, his eyes sharp as ever, rubbing his temples.

“Kid,” he says, looking at Lutz, “taking care of this unreasonable girl is now your absolute maximum priority. This is your most important job, that nobody else can do. Got it? My heart can’t take it, thinking about this kid could be walking around out there, then with no warning at all suddenly collapse in the middle of the street.”

Lutz blinks as Benno, displeased, delivers his orders. He points at himself, doubtfully.

“...I’m the only one who can take care of her?”

“That’s right. Besides you and her family, is there anyone that actually looks after this unreasonable girl? Know anyone?”

“Nope.”

“How about anyone in this shop?”

“No, sir.”

Lutz immediately shakes his head at each of Benno’s questions. I think it might not be just my imagination that his face is practically shining and there’s a hint of a proud gleam in his pale green eyes.

Nngh, I want to grab those proud cheeks and stretch them out.

“Well then, kid, I’ve got a few questions for you. Today, can this girl walk out to the south gate?”

“If we’re watching our pace, then yeah. Since the south gate is near

where we live, if she starts feeling bad we can also just go home.”

This is an everyday thing, but as both Lutz and my family well know, my physical condition is downright deplorable. I’ve been working to gradually train myself up, but no matter how I try I just can’t get my stamina to increase.

Even though, as a kid, I should be steadily growing up.

Benno looks down at me, the girl whose growth rate is terrible even though she’s been training hard, then picks up the bell on top of his desk and rings it once. The door opens with a click, and Mark enters.

“You called for me, Master Benno?”

“Looks like she can walk there if she watches her speed. Lead them there, please.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Huh?” I ask. “Where are we going? I thought the lumberyard was near the west gate?”

I didn’t think we had any business that required us to head towards the south gates. I blink, uncertainly, as Benno shrugs his shoulders.

“Mark told me about your request for a storehouse. I’ll lend you one that’s down by the south gates.”

“Really? Thank you very much!”

As I thank him excitedly, he lets out a little sigh.

“This isn’t for your sake, it’s for the boy’s. It’d be very difficult for him if he has to lug all of the tools everywhere while also looking after you.”

“Whaaat?! I can carry things too, you know! I’ve gotten a little bit stronger, lately.”

As I try to assert my own strength, all three of them simultaneously open their mouths in rebuttal.

“You shouldn’t do anything rash, kid, just go along with it.”

“I’m the one who does the lifting, so don’t do anything that’ll make you

sick again.”

“Since you won’t have to carry anything, please look after your health.”

I, however, refuse. I’m not just going to go along with it. I promised Tory. I’m going to do the things that I can do, and I’m going to increase that number. I’m going to do my own things by my own strength, and I’m going to work hard until I can do the things that I can’t do right now.

With a meek expression, I nod in assent, but Lutz immediately reaches out to grab my cheeks, staring me down.

“Maine, that face... you were just pretending to listen, weren’t you?”

How did that slip out?!

I look up at him, surprised, as he pinches my cheeks. Benno and Mark exchange glances, then nod.

From that day on, Lutz had a very important role in Benno’s shop: “Maine Duty”.

*

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Dogeza is a very Japanese way to express your deepest apologies or show the highest deference by kneeling on the floor and bowing so deeply that your head touches the ground.

Chapter 32: Material and Tool Orders

After we leave Benno's room, Lutz and I are led out of the shop by Mark and towards a warehouse near the south gates. It seems like the south gates are where a lot of craftsmen work, so there are a lot of warehouses in this part of the town. Also, there are a lot more water wells around here than in the residential districts, since craftsmen likely use a lot of water in their work.

The warehouse that Mark leads us to has a well right next to it. It's not a particularly large space; at a glance, it looks to be about three by three and a half meters wide.¹ It looks like it was originally used for workers to store raw materials in, with rough wooden shelves nailed onto the walls. The inside has been roughly swept out, so while it's still a little dusty it doesn't seem like we'll need to do any thorough cleaning. As I look around, I notice that both a pot and a bag full of something have already been left in a corner.

"When the items you order arrive at the shop, we'll send an employee to bring them here. Yesterday, they brought the pot and the ash you ordered; they are in the corner there. Today, the large tub and the stone weight will be arriving. Please be here when they arrive."

As I look at the black pot that Mark is pointing at, my heart fills with gratitude for Benno's assistance. A pot, something that Lutz and I could absolutely never have gotten on our own, is here.

"Whoa, a pot!!" I exclaim. "Lutz! Can you carry this?"

"Yeah, if it's this size. I could also strap it to my back, instead."

"Well, let's measure it! We need to figure out how big the steamer's going to be."

I have a set of ordering materials, that I borrowed from Benno's shop, in my tote bag. As I rush to take out the measuring tape, Lutz casually takes it from my hands.

"...Sure, let's measure it, but let's calm down a little first. If you get too

excited, you'll get sick again."

"Urgh..."

Mark smiles wryly as he watches our exchange.

"If there's no problems with this warehouse, then I'll be returning to the shop today. Tomorrow morning, I plan to go to the lumberyard, so please make absolutely sure you've finished measuring and ordering everything you'll need by then. ...Hmm, I'll leave the shop at the third bell, so I think I should arrive at the central plaza shortly after that."

"Yes, understood!" I say. "Thank you very much for everything so far."

Next, he takes out a set of chains and a key, a serious expression on his face.

"I'll leave this key with you for now. This is the key to this warehouse. When you close up here, please make very sure you don't forget this. Then, after you've locked up, you need to bring this key back to the shop. Lutz, it's alright for you to do this by yourself. All right?"

"Yes," I reply.

After handing the heavy key to Lutz, Mark turns smoothly on his heel, then exits the warehouse.

"Lutz, shall we get started?"

This warehouse doesn't seem to have been used very recently, so it has neither chairs nor any boxes we might sit on. This isn't the kind of place we can really take a break.

"How about we bring in the stuff we have already? The frame we made, the bamboo, the nails..."

"Yeah, that sounds good. The things we definitely have to do today are figuring out the size of the steamer, and then the size of the wood we're going to use, right? I want to go over what I've got down on these orders so far to make sure I'm not forgetting any more lumber we need... after that, we could start on making bamboo strips?"

"If we're cutting and shaving bamboo like that, we'll need some tools for

that too.”

I write down a list of the things we need to do today on my slate, then prop it up against the wall of the warehouse. This way, I think we won’t forget anything.

Lutz and I start heading home to get our things and bring them back to the warehouse. I’m completely unfamiliar with the part of town we’re in, so I’m very lost, but Lutz seems to know exactly where we are as he casually leads us through twisting, narrow alleyways. This warehouse is supposed to be close to the south gate and to my home, but where are we? As the question bounces around in my head, we turn a corner and arrive home. It’s very close, much to my relief, since it’ll be easy on my stamina.

“Okay,” I say, “I’ll go up and get everything in a basket and bring it back down here.”

“Got it.”

All I’ve got at my house is the nails. Since Lutz’s family works in the construction and woodworking industries, it’s very likely that if we’d left the bag of nails there, it’s likely that someone in his family would have thought it was their own bag and taken them off. Similarly, if we left the frame or the bamboo we’ve collected at my place, they’d probably be mistaken for firewood again and burned up, so we left those at Lutz’s.

I put the bag of nails and my knife into the basket. As an afterthought, I grab a dust rag and a broom, too. Since we don’t have anything to use as a chair, at the very least, I want to sweep out part of the floor and lay down a cloth so that we have someplace to sit.

When I head back downstairs, Lutz is already waiting for me, with all sorts of wooden things sticking out of his basket.

“Lutz, what’s that?”

“Oh, this is something Ralph messed up making the other day. I thought we could maybe use it as a chair for now.”

“Heh heh, I also brought some things so we can sit down.”

We head back to the warehouse, put the bag of nails on a shelf, and set the bamboo in a corner. I take out the tape measure, and the two of us measure the pot's dimensions and decide on the size of the steamer that we'll use, then write down on my slate the size of the wood that we'll be steaming.

"This look okay?"

"Yeah."

There's a lot of wood that we need to request from the lumberyard. We need the components for the steamer, the heavy stick we'll use to beat the extracted fibers, the large, flat board we'll need for the paper bed, another flat, but relatively thin board we can stick the paper to as it dries, the bamboo that we'll need to make bamboo strips, and, of course, the wood we'll be making the actual paper out of.

While I double-check to make sure I have everything written down on the order form, I start wondering about what sort of characteristics we want in our wood. Do we want a hard or a soft wood, an old or a young wood?

"Alright," says Lutz, "let's do the bamboo strips."

"Sure. Can you make them small enough?"

"Hmm, last time they were still pretty big. I wonder how we can make thinner ones?"

Under Lutz's direction, we start work on making the bamboo strips. It's relatively straightforward to make the rough cuts with single, powerful strokes, but paring them down to something more slender looks like it's a much slower, painstaking process.

"Let me try, too. If it's fine work, I think I can do it."

I take out my own knife, select a slender piece of bamboo, and try to cut it down. Halfway through, though, it suddenly snaps in two. There's not enough length left on either side for us to be able to use it without it rattling around.

“This is really hard,” I say.

“Yeah, it really is,” says Lutz.

I look at the few, rattly strips we’ve complete, then at the frame we have to fill, judging how much we’ll need to fill it.

I really want to leave this work to people who can actually do it. The two of us have neither enough time nor skill.

As we continue to work, a call come from outside. “I’ve brought your goods!”

An employee from Benno’s shop has arrived, carrying a large tub and a stone weight that’s light enough for Lutz to lift. I have him put them in the corner, next to the pot.

“Maine,” says Lutz, “our delivery came, so let’s call it quits for today.”

As Benno’s employee leaves to head back to the shop, Lutz starts tidying up his tools. Since it’s only just about noontime, though, I still think I have plenty of stamina to keep working.

“I can keep going, you know?”

“...Tomorrow looks pretty difficult, so you should get some rest today. Hey, didn’t you say you needed to do the cooking today?”

“Oh, that’s right.”

My turn to cook came around while I was stuck in bed, so Tory covered for me. So, today, it’s my turn.

“Also,” he continues, “since I’m going to the lumberyard tomorrow, I have to make sure I get all of my stuff done first.”

“Your stuff?”

“I need to make sure I get my share of tomorrow’s chores done today. So, Maine, go home. I’ll go run the key back to the shop after that.”

“Got it.”

I nod in agreement, painfully aware of how much of a burden I am, then start putting everything back in order.

The next day, shortly after the third bell rings, we meet Mark in the central plaza, then head towards the lumberyard. It seems like Benno's shop is the busiest between when it opens just before the second bell and when the merchants start calming down at around the third bell.

Since Lutz is here with us today, I don't collapse on the way there, and we make it to the lumberyard safely. Logs are gathered in piles here or leaned against the walls, a scene not entirely unlike something I've seen in Japan. However, since everything that would usually be done via machine is instead done by hand, there's a huge number of very well-muscled buff dudes wandering around, yelling at each other as they haul wood around and cut it down to size. It's a very lively scene. Almost excessively lively, to the point where I'm a little bit scared.

"Ahh," says Mark, "Foreman, it's been a while."

"Oh! Mark, huh? That Benno kid's doing pretty well, isn't he?"

"Ah, yes. He's doing quite well. For today's business, though, these two are looking for some wood..."

The foreman sports a bristly mustache, peppered with gray, and a shiny bald head. He comes out to greet Mark, who tells him about our search.

"The little girl and the kid, huh? What the heck kinda wood do you need?"

His burly muscles don't match his age at all. As he stares down at me, my breath catches in my throat with a squeak.

"Umm, I'm looking for wood so that I can make a steamer..."

"Huuuh? What kind of wood's that?"

He repeats his question, a dubious expression on his face, leaving me at a total loss for words. I'm pretty sure that Lutz and Mark understand what I've been referring to when I talk about steamers, but I wonder if the foreman doesn't actually know about them? Or, maybe, do I have to actually tell him the specific kinds of wood that I need?

"Ummm, I need something that keeps its shape even when there's a lot

of water vapor... ah, no, when there's a lot of steam; a hard, dried wood. Could you please tell me what kinds of wood like that you have?"

"Hoh? A hard, dried wood, hm. I think I have an idea of what you might need."

The foreman nods to himself, then lists off the names of three different kinds of wood.

"We've got zwan, turaka, and pedithry. What'll it be?"

"What will it be, you ask... Lutz, do you know?"

Even though he's listed off some potential candidates, I have no idea at all what any of those are. I look over my shoulder at Lutz for help.

"Hmm? Zwan's the easiest to work with, right?"

"Well then," says Mark, "let's go with zwan, then. You've decided on the sizes you'll need, correct?"

"Yes!" I say, pulling the order forms from my tote bag. Mark looks them over, double checking to make sure there's no errors.

"Hmm," he says, "there are no problems here. So, foreman, please cut zwan to the dimensions listed here, then deliver it to the shop."

"Alright!"

He glances over the order form, then hands it to a nearby young buff dude.

"Um," I say, "next I need a thick board and a stand to put it on, also out of a wood that won't warp when it's wet."

"I can sell you the wood, but if you want it put together into a stand you're gonna need to do it yourself or find a furniture maker. You want these in zwan, too?"

"Yes, please," I say with a big nod, handing him the order form for the thick board. He huffs as he looks it over, then I pull out another form to hand to him.

"This sure is a lot," he says.

“I’ve still got more,” I reply. “This is for two boards, which need to be able to get wet, and also need to be thin.”

“How thin?” he says, with a frown. “If you cut wood too thin, it’ll start bending when you put any weight on it, y’know?”

I hum tonelessly, digging through my memories. When the image of the board that we’ll be sticking the paper onto pops into my mind, I clap my hands together in inspiration, then take out my slate from its bag. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as I draw a diagram.

“Ummm, it’s going to be set in a frame and reinforced from the back like this, so something thick enough that it won’t bend when that happens. I’m worried about the weight; I know I’m not going to be able to lift it, but if Lutz can’t...”

“I’d be a failure of a man if I couldn’t lift something that big,” interjects Lutz.

There’s no way that Lutz could even begin to compare himself to that brawny foreman. A little anxious, I turn to face him, but before I can open my mouth he’s already wearing an unpleasant frown.

“I’m a man,” he says, “so it’s all right.”

If Lutz talks too big now, he’s going to wind up paying for it later, but if I say anything now, I’ll only be wounding his masculine pride, so I let it slide.

“Next,” I say, “we’ll need a squared timber out of a hard wood, like a club, or like the rod you use when you’re beating your laundry. This also needs to be a size and weight that Lutz can carry and swing around.”

“This sounds completely different than a laundry rod, though? What are you hitting?”

Those were the two things that came to mind when I was thinking of things that you use to hit other things, but it seems that since a club is a weapon and a laundry rod is something mothers hit their washing with, the materials must be very different.

“Wood fibers,” I reply. “We’ll be boiling them until they’re limp, then beating them until they’re soft like cotton.”

“What’re you making, again?”

I cross my fingers in front of my mouth, making an X. “Sorry, but I can’t tell you.”

The foreman huffs again. “Getting the hardness and the weight balanced’ll be important, huh. If we’re gonna get this right, what kind of surface are you going to be doing this on? Stone? Wood? There’s more variables on top of that, too, yeah?”

All of my blood rushes to my head. I had completely forgotten that we’d need some sort of chopping block built that we could beat the fibers on top of.

“...I, I didn’t think about that. R, r, right, we need a block for that too! Can we order those as a set, please? I can write out the order right now!”

“Yeah, if you wanted to do it as a set you could add that to the order here, but... little girl, you’re going to write it?”

“Yes, I will...?”

My head pounds with the realization of my thoughtless mistake. Trying desperately to recover somehow, I immediately take out the measuring tape, the ink, and the pen from the order-writing set, then I add to the form the dimensions of the chopping block, underneath the description of the stick itself.

“Mister,” I say to the foreman, “will this do?”

“Yeah, that’ll do. Is that your entire order?”

“No, next is... um, is there a kind of wood that has really long, tough fibers? If possible, we’re looking for wood with sticky fibers, but if you can’t then it’s okay as long as they can stick together well enough and we can get a lot of them from the wood. I heard that year-old wood is the best for this; after the second year the fibers get too hard and brittle so they get really hard to work with. So, we’re looking for a young, soft wood.”

As I list out the characteristics of the wood that would be easiest to use in paper, the foreman's reaction isn't very good. He tugs on his mustache in thought, frowning.

"Hmmm. Wood that young isn't very useful, so we don't actually carry anything like that."

It seems that this lumberyard doesn't deal in year-old woods unless they get a special order for it.

"Um, then, if you have any idea what kinds of wood might have those traits, could you please at least give us a list of them? We don't know exactly what kind of wood we'll be using, so we can gather the small quantities we need ourselves to test. When we find out what we do need, though, can we order it through you?"

"I can't say until I know how much you're ordering. If it's too little, it's hard for me to make any money."

"I understand. ...Lutz, could you please find out about the names of these trees and where we can find them? I don't think I could tell them apart, myself."

It looks like we're going to have to gather our raw materials ourselves after all, at least to start. Once we get our prototype finished we'll have figured out what kind of wood we're going to want to use, so then when we start mass production we'll be able to place an order for it.

Lutz goes off with one of the young buff dudes to learn about the different kinds of wood and how to distinguish them. Meanwhile, I take out a bamboo strip to show the foreman and ask some questions.

"Ah, that's right," I say, "We need bamboo strips like this; do you have bamboo here?"

"Not that much, but yeah, we do," he says, pointing towards one of the many piles of lumber. There, I see the familiar shapes of bamboo poles stacked up.

"Could you make these bamboo strips here?"

“Fine work like that is a craftsman’s job. Ask a craftsman.”

“A craftsman, okay. Thank you very much. Um, that’s everything in my order for today.”

“Alright,” he says, looking over the stack of order forms. “When it’s all done, you want it sent to Benno’s shop, right?”

All of the order forms I handed him are being placed in Benno’s name. Since we have a contract saying that he’ll provide the initial material investment in exchange for my simple shampoo, it seems that Benno’s the one doing all of the actual ordering. It seems that the formality of having Benno purchase and receive the goods, then have them delivered to us is important to the way the contract magic works.

“Yes, please. Thank you very much for your assistance.”

The foreman heads back off to his duties. As I wait for Lutz to come back, I stick my hand into my tote bag and feel around, making sure I didn’t accidentally forget to turn a form in. All I have left are the order for the stand, which I need to find a furniture maker for, and the order for the bamboo strips, which I need to find a craftsman for.

Hmmm, what should we do about the stand for the paper bed? To be honest, a stand like that doesn’t seem like the kind of thing I need to expressly go to a furniture maker in order to get.

“...Mister Mark,” I say, “Do you have any wooden boxes at the shop that we could use for a table? I think it would be wasteful to ask a furniture maker to make a custom one.”

“Ah, I understand. I’ll make to find some for you. How many do you need?”

“We’re going to need two that are the same size so that we can put a board on top of them. I’d be really happy if we could get two or three more, but the size of those doesn’t really matter.”

Mark readily agrees, since this will be far cheaper than ordering something custom from a furniture maker. When Lutz comes back, Mark says that it’s time to split up for the day.

“Perhaps we should go to the craftsman’s workshop another day. I’d be unable to get in contact with one today, so shall we part ways here?”

“Alright,” I say. “Thank you very much.”

The next day, we head to the forest to gather firewood. While we’re at it, I try to figure out if there was any trees out here that might work for making paper, but since Lutz is ultimately far more knowledgeable about this than I am, I basically just foist the entire task off onto him. I mean, every single tree I see looks just like every other tree to me! Sure, there’s differences in the color and texture of their bark, but there’s so many different variations, I can’t actually remember any at all.

Then, when we stop by the shop to borrow the warehouse key so that we can store what we’ve found, Mark informs us that he was able to get in contact with a craftsman who could help us.

Mister Mark, you’re amazing at your job. Such a quick worker.

Thanks to Mark, five days after our visit to the lumberyard, we’re able to meet with a craftsman. As usual, we meet in the central plaza around the third bell, then head towards our destination. It seems that since this craftsman’s workshop gets a lot of traffic from other workers, it’s located near the south gates.

Unlike the foreman at the lumberyard, this craftsman is, if I had to describe him, a rather slender man. He has the muscles he needs to do his job, but the rest of his physique is the embodiment of minimizing unnecessary things. His ashen hair reaches down to his back, loosely tied into a ponytail so that it doesn’t get in the way of his work.

“What’s the job?”

He scans me up and down with his sharp eyes, the picture of the neurotic artisan. I reflexively cling to Mark’s pant leg.

“I’d like thin bamboo strips like this,” I say, pulling one of the ones we’ve already made out of my tote bag and handing it to him. “I asked at the lumberyard if they could make it, but the foreman said I should go see a craftsman...”

He turns the imprecisely cut strip over in his hands, his mouth pursed.

“Do you need it to be wavy like this?”

“I tried to make it as straight as possible...”

“Hm, if I account for your lack of skill, it’s clear what you’re looking for. Got it. Those are the ingredients?”

The craftsman points at the bamboo that Lutz has in a basket on his back, which we retrieved from the warehouse on our way here. We take it out of the basket and stack it up for him.

“That all you need?”

“Um! I’m hoping that you could make a ‘bamboo mat’, do you think you can?”

I draw a diagram on my slate, then use the one bamboo strip I have as a prop as I try to explain what I’m looking for. Despite my crude explanation, it seems that the craftsman somehow manages to capture the image of what I’m looking for.

“That’s going to be a real pain to make, but I can’t say I can’t make it.”

“Really? Amazing!”

“But, I can’t make that work if I don’t have a strong enough thread. Go get me some of that before you place the order.”

He flicks his hands at us as he talks, shooing us away. However, there’s no way I can let myself be driven out like this. After all, I have literally zero idea as to what kind of thread is going to be tough enough to work.

“Umm, I’m sorry, but I don’t really know what thread is strong enough for you. Would you be able to help me look, please?”

“I’m free to head to the thread wholesaler right now, so I can, sure.”

“Let’s go!”

I lift my fist enthusiastically to the sky. I’m quite happy that this disagreeable-looking craftsman suddenly said something so cooperative.

“Oi, Maine,” scolds Lutz from behind me, grabbing me by the top of the

head. Pouting, I spin around to face him. He glares at me, his green eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Don’t be so rash. You’re the first one who’s gonna pay for that, you know.”

“It seems that today she would like to be carried in my arms today as well, doesn’t it?” says Mark.

“Eek?!” I say.

I don’t know if he clearly remembers how much I hated having been carried all the way home last time; his pleasant smile shows no indication either way as he approaches me. As I cautiously back up, the craftsman, sounding irritated, speaks up.

“Are we going or not? Pick one!”

“We’re going, of course,” says Mark. “Maine said so after all. Right?”

Mark captures me, lifts me up in his arms, and hauls me off to the thread wholesaler. Since we don’t have to worry about watching my walking pace, there’s a big difference in our speed. I’m quietly surprised that, even though I’m being held in his arms, it’s a remarkably smooth ride. I let out a dissatisfied sigh, my face near his shoulder.

I’d planned to keep forging on, but I just wound up being a bother again...

Since the thread wholesaler is along the workers’ streets, it’s not actually very far away. Even still, as someone who’s mentally an adult, being carried in someone’s arms like this makes me want to flee far, far away. When we arrive at the wholesaler, he finally lets me down, letting me walk on my own two feet while in the store.

“Whoa, there’s so much thread here!”

“Yep,” mutters the craftsman, “because it’s a wholesaler. For thread.”

Despite his quip, I’m still amazed by the spectacle of the huge quantity of thread that’s gathered here. In this city, the stalls in the town market don’t carry anything more than what they can reasonably sell to individual

customers, and the shops on the first floor of buildings along the main streets have limited amounts of merchandise on display, just enough for samples, to minimize the damage that a robber or a burglar might cause. It's very rare to see so much of a commodity crammed into a space like this.

"Which of these are the tough ones?" I ask.

In Japan, the thread we use to when making bamboo keta mats is spun from raw silk. Here, I don't know if silkworms, let alone silk, actually exist, so I don't know how to pick a strong enough string.

"Silk from a spinne would be the strongest, especially any harvested during their breeding season in the fall. However, it's expensive, yeah?"

I glance at Mark questioningly, and he returns my glance. I'm not the one actually in charge of the money. Mark is, as he's been entrusted with the final say over the contents of Benno's purse.

"Spinne silk would be fine, but it shouldn't be necessary to be particular about it being from the fall, is it?"

"...Yeah, you're right, but is spinne silk really okay?"

"Yes, it would be."

It seems like spinne silk is a very highly-priced item. The craftsman slowly, gingerly takes down a spool from a shelf full of the most expensive, highest quality goods. Startled, I exchange another glance with Mark.

"However," he says, "if there are complaints about the final product, I will not forgive your mistakes. I trust that you'll finish this task to perfection."

Mark briefly looks over the order form that I've retrieved from my tote bag, then hands it and my sample bamboo stick to the craftsman with a broad smile.

"I leave this in your capable hands."

"...Yeah."

Two postcard-sized mats to fit the paper frames. With that, all of the

orders for our tools have been successfully placed, without any trouble at all. I breathe a sigh of relief.

After that, I wind up playing house-sitter at the warehouse for a while, watching as the goods we ordered start to arrive. As that happens, Lutz and I work to build our tools using the parts that have reached us already.

All the while, we routinely head into the forest to do our gathering, and although we make sure to help around the house enough that we won't get scolded by our families, we steadily gather our raw materials.

We don't yet know if we're going to use edil fruit or the bodily fluids from a slamo bug as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap, so we start by trying edil fruits. It seems that in the autumn, when winter preparations begin, the sticky juice from an edil fruit is commonly spread along window frames, which are then stuffed with cloth to seal the windows off from drafts. As such, in just a little while, the number of fruits available at the town market is going to start decreasing, and the price is probably going to start going up, too. So, since it seems like we won't be able to use edil fruit, we're going to need to use slamo bug juice.

Also, when it came time to go shopping for edil fruit, I was once again laid out with a fever, so Lutz went to meet Mark by himself. I heard from Lutz that he was finally able to get some valuable experience from working with Mark, so I briefly wondered if I've been butting in a little too much.

By the time all of our raw ingredients have been collected, my health has recovered, and we are finally able to start working on making the paper itself, a month and a half has passed since our very first meeting with Benno.

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The original measurement is given as "6 tatami mats". Tatami mats are a kind of woven floor, built to standardized panel sizes, and rooms are generally sized by the number of panels you could fit into the room. A standard layout for a 6-tatami room is about 2.75 x 3.65 meters; I've

rounded to the nearest half-meter to preserve the roughness of the measurement.

Chapter 33: Starting Paper Making

Today, we can finally start making paper. I'm raring to go, excited to the point where Lutz might tell me that I need to back it off a bit.

Today's tasks include finding and cutting down wood from trees that we think might work, based on what we were told at the lumberyard and what Lutz learned after asking various people he knew. Then, I'm thinking that we'll set up next to the river and steam the wood, then submerge it in the river and strip the rough outer bark from it. We can then leave that bark in the warehouse to let it dry out.

Since our prototype is only going to need to be postcard-sized, I don't think we need very much raw wood to use as materials. However, since we'll need to steam it for several hours, we'll need to gather a lot of wood to use as fuel. If we're working in the forest, gathering that much firewood shouldn't be particularly difficult, and if we start to run out we can always go and find more. Lutz, though, seems to be having a hard time lugging both the pot and the steamer.

In order to do this, he had to go out early in the morning to get the key to the warehouse, then go back to retrieve the pot and the steamer. Since we'll have more work to do in the warehouse afterwards, he also let Mark know that we'd be keeping the key for the day. All of this preliminary work went flawlessly, but right now, things are unexpectedly difficult.

"Lutz, are you okay?" I ask.

"...Yeah," he says.

Although he says, that, he does not look at all okay as he trudges forward, the pot and steamer tied securely to his back. It looks like he's about to give out any second now.

The cause is simple. When we looked at the pot, he judged that it was a weight he'd have no problem carrying, and he did the same when we finished the steamer. "Yeah, I can carry this much," he said. However, he didn't actually think about what it would be like to carry both of them simultaneously all the way to the forest.

“Can I carry the steamer, maybe?”

“No, it’s too much for you.”

“...Okay.”

If Lutz says it’s too much for me, then it’s probably too much for me. All I can do right now is cheer Lutz on while I make sure to get to the forest without overdoing it.

As always, a number of other children are walking with us as we all head to the forest together.

“Lutz, whatcha got there?”

“What’re you doing in the forest today?”

Since Lutz is carrying both a pot and a never-before-seen steamer, the other children are very curious.

“A pot and a steamer,” he says, tersely. “Making paper.”

The stuff he’s carrying must be very heavy for him to be so taciturn. The children, though, are so full of curiosity that they pay no attention to his mood and keep peppering him with questions.

“Huh? What are you making?”

“Is it something fun?”

“...No,” he replies. “I have to do this if I want to get my apprenticeship, they’re seeing if I can do it or not.”

“Oh, okay! Got it. Good luck, Lutz!”

I thought the questions were going to be endless, but as soon as they heard that it was something Lutz needed to do to secure his apprenticeship, they immediately started drifting away.

I have no idea why the kids left us alone so quickly, so I ask Lutz about it. He says that even though a lot of kids get their apprenticeships through their parents, a lot of the more popular professions can get a flood of applications. In those cases, some parents will change tack, but it looks like there’s also some apprenticeships that have selection tests.

It seems that other children are absolutely forbidden from interfering in these tests. There's probably cases where some kids mess with others out of revenge, but if word of that were to get out then it would make their own job search even harder.

Oh ho, I see. Trying to get into a popular job is the same, no matter where you go.

When we pass by the gate, Otto waves at us encouragingly. "Good luck!" he says. He probably noticed the pot and steamer on Lutz's back and figured out that we're getting started making paper.

"Yeah, we'll do our best! Oh, Daddy! We're heading out," I say, waving at him.

My father has been sulking a bit lately since I've been spending so much time with Lutz lately, but he still waves back at us, wearing a complicated expression that flickers somewhere between smiling and sullen. He's not happy that I'm on such good terms with both Otto and Lutz, but I know very well that, with his particular mentality, there's no way he wouldn't be happy when his daughter waves cheerfully at him.

"Whoof. I'm tired~. That was way heavier than I thought."

Lutz rolls his shoulders, having set the pot and steamer on the ground near the riverbank.

"Good work, Lutz. Want to take a break for a little?"

"Nah, steaming's going to take about a bell's time once we start, right? I'll rest then."

Even as he's saying that, he's already starting to pile up rocks in a circle, building a makeshift stove that we can set the pot on top of.

That's Lutz for you. Nothing's too impossible for him.

Compared to Lutz, who's so used to outdoor work, my previous life was all about indoor work, so I don't have very much experience with this at all. Not being very useful, though, is basically my natural state. All I can do right now is gather up wood from the nearby area and hand it over to

Lutz. He fills the pot up with water from the river, sets it on top of the stove, then quickly piles up wood underneath it and gets a fire going.

“I’ll head off and start cutting down some wood, so how about you take a break and watch the fire for a while?”

“Aren’t you the one that needs a break?!”

“Well, if your health gets worse before we can make paper, I’ll really be in trouble. You’ll probably be fine gathering more wood around here, but don’t move around too much. Also, if anything happens, give a shout. Got it?”

“...Alright.”

Like Lutz asked, I quietly stay near the fire, keeping watch over it. Although, it looks like it’s going to be quite a long time before it actually starts boiling, so I’ve got some spare time. I gather up more fallen wood from around the area, bring it back to the firepit, and feed it into the fire.

When I’ve collected all the wood from the immediate area, I head a little bit further into the forest looking for more. As I reach down to pick up a stick, I see something half-buried in the dirt. It looks like a large red berry, kind of like a pomegranate.

“Huh? What’s that?” I wonder aloud. “Is it edible? Or maybe can I press oil out of it?”

I’m convinced that most of the things in the forest are used in day-to-day life around here. After all, I’ve been living in this world for nearly a year now, so it’s only natural that I’d start thinking like it. When I was in Japan, I wouldn’t have done anything like arbitrarily gathering up whatever I see on the ground.

“I’ll have to ask Lutz about this,” I muse.

I grab a sturdy stick and start digging around the red berry, until I have it free of the ground. I reach down to pick it up, only to find it rapidly heating up in my hands.

Oh no! This is probably some incomprehensibly weird fruit.

Somehow, it seems like this red berry is another one of those really strange ingredients that I sometimes wind up using in my cooking. To be honest, I have literally no idea what's about to happen, much less how to deal with it. Frantically, I summon all of my power, and throw it as far away from me as I possibly can... which means it lands about five meters away.

Bang! Ba-ba-bang! The red berry bursts open violently, scattering everywhere. Suddenly, countless plants start sprouting from the ground. As I stare, dumbfounded, they quickly grow until they're up to my ankles.

What?! What the hell?! What are these pop-up trees?!1

I frantically run away from this clearly abnormal situation, yelling at the top of my lungs.

"Lutz! Lutz! Luuutz! Something weird's happeniiiiing!"

"What's wrong, Maine?!"

Lutz comes crashing through the trees, probably from somewhere nearby. As soon as he sees what I'm pointing at, all the color drains from his face. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and lets out a piercing whistle.

"Tronbay!" he yells.

"What's tro—" I start to ask, but he cuts me off.

"I'll explain later!"

He immediately unsheathes his machete, chopping away at the rapidly-growing plants. By now, they're up to his knees (and up to my thighs). It's very clear that these fast-growing plants are actually extremely dangerous.

"Head to the river, Maine! Got it?!"

"G... got it!"

There's no spare time to chat in the middle of an emergency. I flee back towards the riverbank. The other children come running in from the other direction, summoned by Lutz's whistle.

"What's u— whoa, tronbay?!"

“It’s tronbay!”

“Cut it down, now!”

As always, I’m the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on. It looks like all the kids who came running already know what these pop-up trees are. Like Lutz, they all take out their knives and machetes as they head towards the plants.

As the children run around, cutting down the pop-up trees, I sit by the pot and watch the reaping unfold. The foe is a plant, I think to myself, so couldn’t I just burn it down since I’ve got fire here? However, I’m already winded from that little bit of running I did, so I can’t really do anything but sit by the river like Lutz told me.

“Any more still growing?” I hear.

While I sat, worn-out, by the riverbank, the reaping of the pop-up trees seems to have drawn to a close. The children search about, making sure that there aren’t any that they’ve missed.

“I think we’re alright now.”

“There may be more tronbay around, so be pay attention out there when you’re working. If anything happens give a whistle.”

The children disperse, going back to their gathering. Lutz comes over to stand next to me.

“I told you to go sit by the river... was that too much?”

“...Yeah, too much.”

Lutz just finished chopping down a large number of plants, but I’m still the one who’s shamelessly gasping for every breath. If someone were to stumble across us like this, they definitely wouldn’t be able to guess who was on the front lines of that battle.

“Lutz, what was, that?”

“That was tronbay.”

Tronbay, he says, are extremely fast-growing trees that, if you let them

grow to adulthood, immediately suck up all the nutrients from the surrounding soil. Also, if you let them get too big, they become extremely difficult to cut down, to the point where you need to request the order of knights to send someone to deal with them.

Huh, so there's an order of knights here? As I'd expect of a fantasy world.

"It's weird, though."

"What is?"

Lutz sits down on a rock on the riverbank, catching his breath, his head tilted to one side in puzzlement.

"It's kinda early for tronbay to show up. It's usually much closer to autumn before you start seeing them."

"Huh..."

"They also were growing really quickly. But the soil around them wasn't really churned up..."

"Hmm!"

"What, you don't think that's weird?"

Lutz stares at me, unimpressed by my lack of reaction. Asking me directly like that, though, puts me in a tight spot. This is the first time I've seen something like this, so I can't tell if it's weird or not. Trees popping up out of the ground like that is weird enough to me already.

"Umm, I've never seen tronbay before, so I can't tell if that was any different than usual."

"Ah, that's right. You've only been coming to the forest since the spring."

He nods several times in understanding. As he does so, the pot starts audibly bubbling as the water comes to a boil.

"Lutz, where's the wood?"

"It's scattered somewhere around there, I think..."

He points over to where the tronbay was growing, hanging his head. It

looks like he'd found enough wood well before the pot came to a boil, but he threw away all his hard work when the tronbay suddenly appeared.

"...Hey, Lutz. We've come all this way, so how about we try making paper out of tronbay? There's a lot of it, and since it was cut down right after it started growing, its fibers are probably still very soft..."

"Hey, you're right. Going back to get the other stuff right now would be a huge pain."

We put the tronbay in the steamer, then Lutz sets it on top of the pot. All we need to do for a little while is just keep feeding the fire so it doesn't go out. Lutz keeps an eye on the condition of the fire for a while, occasionally throwing in a few pieces of the firewood that I'd gathered earlier.

"Maine, sorry, but could you watch the fire for a bit? I'm going to go gather up the wood I dropped."

"Okay," I reply.

He heads back out to where he'd been startled by the tronbay to go pick up the wood, perhaps because he's had a bit of time to rest. I, in my new position as fire watchman, grab tightly to a stick, staring intently at the fire. By now, I'm actually able to regulate fires a little bit, but I've made too many inattentive mistakes getting to this point that I can't take my eyes off of it now.

Gas stoves really are convenient. At this point, induction grills and microwave ovens are practically magic. Seriously.

As the tronbay steams, Lutz heads off to work on his gathering duties. It seems like there's quite a lot of things to eat in the forest around the time summer turns to autumn. I gather some things as well, alternating between keeping an eye on the fire and picking up whatever catches my eye.

"I found a lot of stuff, Lutz! What do you think?"

"Lemme see, lemme see... ...Maine! Pay attention! Actually look to see if you can bring something home before you pick it up."

As he looks over the pile of things I'd collected, the color drains from his face. He goes through the pile, pulling out everything that couldn't be eaten. Over thirty percent of what I'd found was poison.

"This one's bad. If you eat it, your arms and legs will go all numb, and you won't be able to move for three whole days. This is bad too. If you eat it, you'll foam at the mouth and die. This too! It'll make your stomach hurt terribly for two days. ...Maine, if you don't learn this stuff soon, you won't have to worry about dying from sickness, because you'll poison yourself to death! Got it?"

Yep. And it's not just me who'll die if I don't remember this, it'll be my family, too.

I need to immediately start memorizing not just the things that are useful in everyday life, but also how to distinguish which things out here are poisonous. I don't have anything like an illustrated field guide, either, so I have no way to do this other than have it shown to me in person.

"I'll try hard to remember, so please teach me about it," I say.

"Yeah."

Faintly, the sound of the city's bell rings through the air, and we take the steamer off the pot. A burst of steam hits us in the face as we open it up, but just from taking a look at it I actually can't tell if it's had enough time to steam.

"Is this okay?" asks Lutz.

"I don't really know, but let's put it in the river and peel off the bark."

We dunk the wood in the river, then try to strip off the bark while the wood is still warm. It comes off cleanly, without crumbling or snapping at all. This is far easier than I thought it was going to be. We might have found an excellent material after all.

"This tronbay might be really good for making paper," I say.

"We don't know when it'll grow, though, and we have to cut it down when it's really young, right?"

“...Whoa, this isn’t going to work, then.”

I sigh, thinking back on how things unfolded today. If we could cultivate this, it would be an amazing material, but, alas.

“Hey, Maine. Is this all we need to do today?”

“Yeah. Next we need to let the bark dry out completely.”

“...Hmmm. Alright, I’ll go wash up the pot, so take care of these, okay?”

Lutz leaves me with tidying up the pile of bark as he goes to clean up the pot and the steamer. Sitting there and lining all of the strips in a row is remarkably fun, so I’m in good spirits as I pick away at the pile.

As we return home, I carry several strips of the bark we harvested in the basket on my back. Lutz carries the pot and steamer, putting his entire soul into lugging it along. Since he’s also carrying the things we gathered today, his burden is definitely way heavier than it was when we had first gone out.

Both Lutz and I are barely still on our feet as we make it back to town and split off from the rest of the group to head to the warehouse. When we get there, Lutz unlocks the door, steps inside, and drops everything to the ground.

“Aaargh, that was heavy!”

“You had a lot more stuff coming back than you did before, after all. You know, I could probably have carried a little more...”

What I’d carried back already took all of my effort. I didn’t really have any extra surplus of energy to help him out. Lutz sits down in the corner and takes out a fistful of bark strips from the pot.

“Hey, Maine,” he says, waving them around, “how and where are we going to dry these things?”

“Eh? Ummm... how, huh?”

I’d been thinking that we’d dry it out kinda like you dry out hay, but we don’t have any poles to do that from. I look around the room, searching for something to use.

“Lutz,” I say, putting a hand on his shoulder, “I know your tired, but could you hammer a bunch of nails at even distances into these shelves, please? I’ll dry the bark on that.”

“...If I have to...”

Lutz hammers nails into the board, his hammer ringing, and I hang strips of bark from them. This is doable for now, since we don’t have very many of them, but when we move on to mass production, we’ll need a dedicated place for drying.

When we get to the point where we start mass production, I’ll ask Benno about it. We don’t need to worry about that right now, right?

“It would be pretty bad if these couldn’t dry completely here. If they’re damp for too long they’ll start getting moldy. Tomorrow, when we go to the forest, maybe we should take these along and dry them in the sun?”

“So, could we just bring the bark with us tomorrow and keep the work pretty light? I want to gather some normal things. There’s a lot of things I need to get for my family, so I’d really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, I want to gather a lot of mushrooms too so that I can try drying them out. I want to try making soup stock out of them.”

“...Maine, get better at picking out the poison ones first.”

The next day, we bring the bark with us. I hang the strips off the rim of my basket, then collect quite a large number of mushrooms.

About twenty percent of them were poisonous.

That’s weird, I didn’t expect that...

Over the next few days, we let the bark dry out in the sun until it was completely dry. I don’t actually know how to tell when it’s “completely dry”, so I let it dry until I started wondering if I was maybe overdoing it. With the hard, dry bark strips in hand, we head back out to the forest. Our next step now is to let them soak in the river for a full day, so the weather is actually important.

We pick a spot in the river that wouldn’t really stand out to anyone

looking for it, then arrange some rocks in a circle and place the bark inside.

“Will this work?” asks Lutz.

“...Probably. Let’s check on it on our way back home.”

I don’t have much practical experience, so I’m not very confident, but I’m pretty sure this is probably going to work. While I think about it, I look down at my feet, immersed in the river water.

...It should be obvious, but I don’t have any rubber boots or gloves.

Today, the weather is still fairly warm, so the water is merely cool, but as the seasons progress, the river might start getting life-threateningly cold.

“Lutz, before it gets too cold, we need to get all of the wood to this point, not just the tronbay. At some point we won’t be able to go in the river anymore.”

“...You’re right. The river’s pretty cold already, too.”

Perhaps he’d been thinking about what was going to happen when the weather got cold too, because he frowns, nodding in agreement to my suggestion.

“Today let’s cut down some wood, and hide it somewhere like we did with the clay. Tomorrow if we bring the pot and the steamer, shouldn’t we have some wood ready to go?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We spend some time searching for suitable wood, collecting a variety of different kinds and stashing them underneath a bush. While we do our gathering, I occasionally stop by the river to check on the state of the bark. They’ve been drifting around within the enclosure of the rocks, but they don’t look like they’re in any danger of being washed away. They’ve also started to swell up a bit from being immersed in the water.

“I’ll be kinda worried while we’re away from the forest, but I think it’ll be okay,” says Lutz.

“...Yeah.”

With great reluctance, I head home, but even then I can't help but worry about what's happening to the bark. What if it suddenly starts raining super hard upstream, causing the water to surge and wash everything away? What if bandits come, see that there's floating treasure, and steal it? Increasingly strange thoughts bounce unceasingly around my head as I stare blankly at the wall.

The next day, I'm fidgeting constantly as we walk back towards the forest, but when we arrive I see that neither has a flash flood washed everything away nor have bandits stolen it, so they're right there where we left them.

"Oh, phew, they didn't disappear."

"...So," says Lutz, "now what do we do?"

Lutz picks up a soggy, floppy strip of bark and looks at it dubiously.

"We'll use our knives to strip off this outer part, leaving only the white inner part of it. Although, let's start steaming the wood we got yesterday first. We can work on this while the wood's steaming."

"Got it."

The stone stove we made last time is still there, so after we do a little bit of maintenance we set the pot and the steamer back on it again. With that complete, we find a large, flat rock near the riverbank, close enough that we can keep an eye on the pot, and start working on peeling off the outer bark.

"Looks like we can leave the bark we want to dry here for now. Let's try to get all of the white bark finished while the weather's still warm out."

"Right!"

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk..... Screeeeeeeeeeeeek.....

We place the bark on top of the stone, then start stripping the dark outer bark away so that we can keep only the lighter inner bark. It's kind of like slicing off the high-quality breast meat from a chicken. The bark isn't quite as tough as that, though, so we have to use short, halting strokes.

There's probably better tools and better methods for doing this, but right now, I need to make the best of what I've got.

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk..... Screeeeeeeeeeeeek.....

"Hey, Maine. This, um... well, it's not like I can't do it, but..."

"Yeah, we need a table for this."

The sound of our knives scraping against the stone shoots through my body, leaving me with unceasing goosebumps. I very, very much want some sort of cutting board to do this kind of work on.

Thinking back on the list of tools that I'd written down, I really did wind up missing a lot of necessary things. I thought I'd had a good grasp on it, but there's a lot of things I didn't know about at all. As we work, it looks like we're going to need to gradually supplement our supplies with more things that we need.

With tears in my eyes, I continue peeling away at the bark, my goosebumps serving as a keen reminder of how important experience actually is.

Translator's notes:

1. There's a pun here that doesn't have a particularly good translation. Urano describes the plants as “によきによつ木” (nyoki-nyokki). “によきによき” (nyoki-nyoki) is an onomatopoeic expression that describes tall, thin things popping up everywhere, one by one, and “木” (ki) means tree. She's swapping the last syllable of the first expression with the word for tree to describe trees that pop up everywhere.

Chapter 34: A Regretful Mistake

Today, we brought with us our pot and some ash. As the dark outer bark of the other wood we're experimenting with dries in the sun, we'll boil the light inner bark from the tronbay together with the ash for about a bell's worth of time. Lutz is much lighter on his feet today, perhaps because just the pot and the amount of ash we'll be needing today aren't all that heavy for him.

After we walk to the riverbank, I set down the basket I was carrying on my back, then hang strips of bark from its edges to dry. While I do so, Lutz starts preparing the pot. He fills it with water, sets it on top of our stone stove, then starts heading off to find firewood.

"Listen up, Maine. Do not, under any circumstance, leave this pot."

"I get it already!"

The pot and the ashes are both very important and very difficult to acquire, so they're worth quite a lot of money. On top of that, we'll be in big trouble if the bark we've processed so far gets stolen as well. So, even someone as useless as me can come in handy once in a while, watching the stuff.

I've been putting more effort into gathering lately, wandering around more and more, so Lutz has been incessantly hammering in his point.

"You say that you get it, but every time you see something interesting, you immediately stagger off to look at it!"

"I'll stay right here until you get back, so just go already!"

When I first started coming to the forest, I used to set down my basket as soon as I arrived, because it was so heavy. Whenever I tried leaving it behind as I went deeper into the forest, though, Lutz and Tory would get amazingly angry at me. Unlike in Japan, it seems like in this world you'd never, ever wander off and leave any of your things unattended. For this reason, all the kids who go to the forest always have their baskets and boxes worn on their backs, and they don't ever gather more than they can

carry.

Lutz very quickly comes back with wood, which he uses to build a fire, then immediately takes off to get more for later. I periodically adjust the position of the basket as the daylight shifts, moving it out of the shadows in order to maximize the amount of drying time the outer bark gets, all while still keeping an eye on the pot.

“Is it boiling yet?”

“Yeah, just about, I think.”

To the bubbling pot, I add the strips of inner bark and the ash, then realize that I need something to stir the pot with. However, we don't have anything like that prepared.

Nooo... yet another thing I didn't think we'd need.

I slump down dejectedly, suddenly aware of just how lacking my imagination is, then start looking around for something we might be able to use.

“Lutz, could you please make me a couple of long straight sticks, about the same length, that I could use to stir the pot? I think wood would peel apart and get mixed in, so it would be great if you could use bamboo. There's probably some nearby, right?”

“Sticks made out of bamboo? Got it.”

Lutz skillfully cuts a length of bamboo and whittles it into two long cooking chopsticks for me. Using those, I start stirring the pot. As I marvel at how much better he's gotten at carving bamboo, maybe from when he made all those bamboo strips, Lutz murmurs something to himself.

“...You're really great at stirring things with those, huh.”

“Um?! Y-y-yes! They're super handy, aren't they?”

I force a smile onto my face, covering my sudden panic, as a cold sweat runs down my spine. This world doesn't have Asian cooking, so of course it doesn't have any chopsticks, so of course it wouldn't have any people in it who are able to use chopsticks. There probably doesn't exist a single

normal little girl on this planet who would look at a pot that needs to be stirred, ask someone to make some chopsticks for her, wield them both in one hand correctly, then stir away like it's the most normal thing in the world.

Whoa, Lutz has a kind of doubtful expression on his face. It must be just my imagination. Just my imagination. Just my imagination, right?

I continue stirring the pot, internally second-guessing every single movement. It would be very suspicious of me to suddenly change my grip and grab them like normal sticks right after he pointed it out. I have to keep using them like this for now, but my heart is pounding in my ears.

Aaaaaahhh, I'm such an idiot! This totally isn't just me thinking I'm looking suspicious!

I try to keep my face as normal as I can as I continue stirring the boiling bark. After a while, I hear the faint chiming of the town bell, signaling that it's probably about time to move on.

We put the stewed bark in the river, simultaneously washing out the ash and exposing it to the sunlight. The more it's exposed to the sun, the lighter it should be bleached. I don't know exactly how the plants of this world behave, though, so I'm having to make assumptions based on what I remember from Earth.

"Now we leave it like this for another day," I say.

"Right. Got it," says Lutz.

To make sure our paper will be as white as we can get it, we'll leave the bark in the river for another full day. After Lutz finishes washing up the pot, we take turns going out to do our gathering work.

I manage to reduce the total percentage of poisonous mushrooms by a just a little bit. I'll need to keep at it like this.

The next day, our main paper-related task is just retrieving the bleached white bark from the river. Essentially, we're just going about our gathering business as usual, then when we're just about ready to head back we'll stop by the river and collect the bark. To do that, instead of bringing the

pot with us today we've borrowed a bucket from home, but that's all we need for today.

"Work's going to be mostly at the warehouse starting tomorrow, after all," I say.

"Ah, okay. So, we have to make sure we get all of our gathering done today, then."

I wind up with a sizable amount of things, including edible mushrooms that Lutz helped me select, several nearly-ripe melia fruit that Lutz helped me pick, and some cran that I hope to boil down into jam. While we work, I sample a few things for myself. These fruit are far, far more sour than anything I used to eat in Japan, but since this world lacks sweet things so dearly, you could think of these as delicious.

The next day, instead of going to the forest, we sit outside the well in front of our warehouse to work. Today, I hope to get through picking all the junk out of the fibers and combing them out, enough to make several sheets of paper.

Picking the junk out of the fibers involves finding and removing any damaged or knotted sections of the wood, which will increase the quality and consistency of the finished paper. Since this is work that can be done sitting down, I'm in charge of that. While I pick through it, Lutz is peeling edil fruit, crushing it, and mixing the pulp with water to make a sticky binding agent.

"Hey, Maine. This the kinda goop you were looking for?"

"...Hmmm, I think so? Since it's sticky, I think that's good, but honestly I don't know exactly what we need. Try thinking about what it's going to be like when we're mixing the fibers in with it."

After I'm done removing all of the junk from the fibers, we start pounding them out. Using a squared timber made of a hard, oak-like wood, we need smash away at the pile of bark until it's as soft as cotton. In order to make the stick comfortable to hold, we whittle the corners off of one side of it, then wrap some cloth that we borrowed from home around that side. Then, Lutz starts pounding away at it. This is Lutz's job. If I were

to try it, given how little strength I have, all I'd do is get in the way.

This time, since we're just working on a prototype, we don't really need very many fibers so this doesn't take a tremendous amount of time, but when we're looking to start increasing the quantity, it looks like this might be really tough.

We put the beaten, softened fibers in the tub, add the binder, then add water a little bit at a time so that we can regulate the stickiness of the mixture. Ordinarily, the next step would involve using a kind of large comb called a mase to churn this all together. For now, though, since we're working with such small quantities, I have Lutz make two more sets of cooking chopsticks, then I hold them together like I was about to use them to whip up a custard, and mix the fibers up that way.

...If I remember right, when I made recycled paper out of an old milk carton that one time, the mixture felt kind of like this...

Since I am nothing even remotely like a craftsman, I don't have any real sense for regulating the mixture, so I try my best to recreate how I remember the paper slurry I worked with back then felt. Finally, I take that slurry and spread it onto the bamboo mat in the paper frame.

"Aaah, finally, the part I actually know how to do!"

When we made homemade paper in my home economics class, the process was simple: we took recycled milk cartons, boiled them, peeled off the shiny polyethylene coating, put them into an electric mixer, added laundry starch, spread it out over a screen, and let it dry. We're at the stage now in making washi that my home economics experience actually applies to: spreading pulp out to dry.

My time has finally come! Roar out, my practical experience!

"You really know how to do this?" asks Lutz, looking at me with a very doubtful expression on his face as I quickly set up the paper frame.

Well, certainly, there have been a lot of parts in this process that have been really vague, and there have been a lot of tools that I didn't know we needed until we actually needed them, but all of those problems were

because I lacked any actual practical experience.

Although I'm a little bitter about how little confidence Lutz has in me, I still stand up straight, suck in my baby gut, and look him dead on.

"Leave it to me!" I say, cheerfully. "I've done this part before."

"...When?" he says, frowning. "Where?"

The sudden sharpness in his voice makes my heart freeze.

"Guh?! ...A, a, aaaaa, a maiden has her secrets!! Don't pry!!"

Aaaaaaaaaaagh! I'm an idiot! I'm such an idiot! What am I saying?! He's staring now! He's staring at me! Aaaaaagh! Did I just wreck everything for myself?!

I try desperately to hide the screams of terror in my heart behind a pleasant smile as I transfer some of the pulp into the paper frame. My fingers tremble slightly as I work, but not so much that it can be seen. I scoop some pulp into the frame, then shake it around, letting it spread out over the surface of the mat.

"Why're you moving it like that?"

"Oh, this? By shaking it around, you can make sure it spreads out evenly so the paper will be the same thickness for the whole sheet. After this, depending on the kind of paper and how thick we want it, we might repeat this step a few more times."

"Hmmm, you've done this before, so you know a lot about it, huh?"

Lutz's frigid stare drills into me, scrutinizing every tiny detail of my facial expression. No matter what I say, I don't think I'll be able to weasel my way through an answer to that remark. Instead, all I can do is keep quietly working, then abruptly change the subject.

"Uh, um, Lutz. I was thinking that we should change up how many times we're doing this step for each sheet so that we can test out different thicknesses for the paper, what do you think?"

"...Yeah, sure."

Perhaps he thought something was up with my spontaneous topic switch, because his eyes grow even colder as he continuously glances between the work that I'm doing and the expression on my face. As he stares, I keep spreading pulp out over the frame.

Aaaaaargh, I think I just wrecked myself on my own wreckage again...

When enough pulp is evenly spread, I remove the bamboo mat from the paper frame, then transfer the sheet of filtered paper over to the paper bed.

"When you're transferring paper over to the bed, you don't want there to be any space between the new sheet and any sheets that you've already made, so you need to be careful like this about where you put everything down, starting from the first one."

"Let me try."

Lutz sets the mat back into the frame, then starts spreading pulp out himself. Since we're only making small, postcard-sized sheets, it doesn't take much movement to spread the pulp evenly across the surface of the mat. We take turns making sheets, working mostly in silence. Although I'd tried to prepare enough white bark to make only a few sheets of paper, by the time we're finished, we have a full ten, showing just how off my calculations really were.

Well, making too much isn't actually a bad thing.

"We haven't made very many sheets today, but no matter if we're making a a lot or a little, we'll take this one day's worth of paper and leave it here on the paper bed for a whole day so the water can naturally run off it."

"Then what, after that?"

"Then we slowly start adding weight on top so that we squeeze the rest of the water out of it. We'll put the stone weight on top of it and leave it alone for a day. If we do that, all of the leftover stickiness from the binding agent should go away."

"Hmm...! You know your stuff. Have you maybe done this before?"

Whoa, Lutz's eyes are penetratingly harsh. I've been completely exposed, haven't I. I've managed to wreck everything for myself now, haven't I. I am a complete and utter idiot.

However, since all he's doing right now is staring at me with narrowed eyes, thinking deeply about something or other, there's no way that I'm going to say anything else to finish myself off. I've done enough damage already, so since I don't want to do any more I keep working, indifferently, as if I didn't want to be wasting any time on idle chatter.

If I tried to lie my way through this, I'd probably immediately mess up, and suddenly being perfectly honest with him is far too risky. I'm positive that he'll say something once we manage to finish making paper, but I don't know how much of this he's figured out or what he's actually going to say.

I've already thought about how I'd deal with the situation, so there's not really any problem there. I hate painful things, and I hate scary things. If anything like that looks like it's going to happen, I'll unleash the fever that I keep bottled up inside my body, let myself be swallowed by it, and disappear.

Lately, I've been feeling like the fever is getting more powerful than it used to be, so I'm sure it won't take very long for it to devour me once I let it out.

Unfortunately, there's one big new regret that has come into my life since the last time I thought about this. All that's left on finishing this paper is letting it dry out. If we haven't made any mistakes, I'll finally have been able to make paper so, before I disappear, I want to make a book.

I wonder if I can stall long enough to make a book?

I want to buy myself some time. For now, until I can finish a book, I need to come up with some way to drag things out.

As I contemplate what I could do, I continue jerkily going through the motions of my work.

The next day, we don't talk very much either. We walk to the forest, put

the next round of dark outer bark into the river to soak, then do our gathering work. When we return to the town, we drop by the warehouse to put the stone weight on top of the paper bed, but since there isn't a whole lot else to actually do, there really isn't anything to keep me from constantly looking over to see how Lutz is doing. I'm very much aware that he, too, keeps glancing over to look at me.

"Hey, uh..." he says.

"Hm? What's up?"

A tremor runs uncontrollably through my body as Lutz speaks up. I'd planned to be calm and composed, like nothing was wrong at all, but I can't make myself act like I thought I could. While I wait nervously for his next words, Lutz scratches furiously at his head, ruffling his blond hair. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then closes it again.

"...Never mind."

"O... okay."

These are seeds that I have sown myself, so I'm well aware that there's nothing more that I can do now, but as long as things continue like this, there's no way I'll find any comfort.

The next day, we go to the forest to work on stripping off the outer bark from our next set of materials, making sure not to forget to bring a board to work on this time. This time, the work is far, far more difficult than it was with the tronbay. The fibers are left in tatters as I pass my knife through them. This isn't only due to my own incompetence, though, even Lutz seems to be having a hard time. Tronbay fibers worked so well, but the difficulty of working with this material makes me wonder if we even can make paper out of it.

"...This material's different, so it's way harder, huh."

"Yeah, it really is."

I can't help but let out a sigh as I compare the tattered fibers to our current relationship.

“We can let the inner bark dry like it is, so let’s stop for now.”

“Mm. Hey, uh...”

“What’s up?”

“...Nah, maybe later. I’ll tell you when we’ve made some paper.”

Lutz closes his mouth and doesn’t say anything more, and I give him a small nod. Inside, I’ve already prepared myself for the worst. Lutz has noticed that I am not, in fact, Maine, and he’s going to blame me for it. After all, ever since that enormous mistake, he’s never called me “Maine” even once.

When we finish making paper, I wonder just what kind of yelling I’m going to get? Or maybe is it going to be abuse? Thanks to my overactive imagination, the Lutz in my mind starts screaming worse and worse insults and abuse at me. In my imagination, my heart feels hollow, and I hang my head.

How could you say all that, Lutz! You’re so mean! Even though you’re a figment of my imagination, you’re making me cry! I’m crying!

The next day, we work at the warehouse. First, we hang the inner bark we worked on along the edge of my basket so that it can dry in the sun, and set it outside. Next, we lift the stone weight from the paper bed, then carefully peel off each sheet of paper and stick them to another board.

“We really should use a paintbrush or something to get all the air out from underneath these sheets, but I guess I forgot to order that too. Ah well, ah well. These are postcard-sized, so if we’re careful about it, it’ll probably work out.”

“...Wow, you forget way too much stuff.”

Lutz shoots me a brief glare, but thanks to all of the hideous abuse my imaginary Lutz has been constantly showering me with, something at this level doesn’t even faze me. I shrug my shoulders a bit, brushing off the insult.

“Well, make sure you don’t forget anything either, next time we do this.

...That aside, though, once we let these dry in the sun, they'll be all done. The longer we let them stay in the sun, they brighter white they'll get, too."

Lutz carries the board outside and leans it against a wall so that the sun can hit it. After that, he washes off the paper bed in with water from the well, then sets it next to the board with the paper on it so that it can dry as well.

The bright gleam of the white paper lined up to dry under the perfectly clear, blue sky creates a beautiful contrast. I let out a sigh of satisfaction, wondering if this is the paper that I'll be able to make into a book.

"Haaah, it's paper! It's really turned into paper. ...It's really paper."

"Hey, so..."

"Let's let it dry until evening. When it's dry, we'll need to peel it off carefully so that it doesn't rip, then it'll be totally finished."

With the paper so close to being complete, I want to put off having to face Lutz just a little while longer. Perhaps he senses this in my expression, because irritation suddenly flashes across his face.

"Hey, it's basically done, right?"

"...Well, yeah, but..."

"I told you, right? When we've made some paper, I've got something I need to say to you."

The time of my reckoning is at hand. A sharp light glitters in Lutz's green eyes, as if an anger deep inside him is clawing its way towards the surface.

I bite my lip, hard, telling myself that I'll stay standing no matter what he might say to me. Steeling myself, I turn to face Lutz dead on.

Chapter 35: Lutz's Maine

"You want to talk here?" I say. "Not in the warehouse?"

"Here's fine."

Since this conversation might get complicated quickly, I thought it might be better to have it indoors, away from the public eye, but Lutz shakes his head.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

Anger may burn in Lutz's green eyes, but his behavior is comparatively calm. Without suddenly flying into a rage, he begins to speak in a low voice that hints at the anger he keeps contained, boiling in his gut.

"...Who are you, really?"

A difficult question right off the bat. I actually don't quite know what to call myself. Even now, I still think of myself as Urano Motosu, but no matter how anyone looks at me, all they could possibly see is Maine. Also, I've been living in this body for nearly a year now, growing accustomed to life in this world, so I'm no longer really Urano Motosu, either.

Urano only read books, and didn't really do anything else of her own volition. When I went to college, I was commuting to and from home, so I never even moved out of my parents' place. Thanks to the fact that my mother was fundamentally a housewife, I didn't have to do much housework, although I was technically capable of doing it if I ever felt so inclined.

Going to the forest every day like this to gather things for my family, devoting myself to finding new flavors so that I can broaden my diet even just a little, making paper from scratch so that I can read books in the future... none of these things are actually necessary. If you compare the me of right now to the Urano of the past, whose desires were limited to reading whatever book happened to be nearby, we're absolutely different.

As I worry over how exactly I should answer, Lutz takes my silence as a sign that I'm not going to answer at all. He glances at me again, strength

flaring in his eyes, and asks me again.

“You know how to make paper like this, and you said you’ve done this before, right?”

“...It was very different the last time I made it.”

“And that’s not Maine.”

“...Yeah.”

Although I still want to hide the truth, Lutz is already convinced of it. Even if I were to lie, nothing would come from it. I answer honestly.

“Maine couldn’t know anything like that,” says Lutz. “She barely ever left her house.”

From Maine’s memories, I know very well that Maine only rarely left her house. Thanks to that, I had almost no information about the world, and who knows how many problems that has caused me? Since Maine’s memories were of almost nothing but the inside of her house, I couldn’t even catch a glimpse of what this world would consider to be common sense, and my own modern common sense constantly clashes with that of this world. Even still, I think that I’m making a lot of mistakes.

“That’s right,” I say. “Maine really didn’t know much of anything.”

“So, who the hell are you?!” he shouts. “Where’s the real Maine?! Bring Maine back!”

Lutz raises his voice, his anger unleashed. However, whether it’s because the things I had imagined him saying were far more cruel than the words he hurls at me now, or whether it’s because I’d already prepared myself for what was going to come when we’d finished making paper, I feel entirely calm right now. My reaction is vastly different from the panic I showed right after I wrecked myself earlier.

“Sure, I can bring her back, but... I think it would be better if I did that at home, you know?”

Lutz’s eyes go wide with astonishment, and he furrows his eyebrows. It seems he didn’t expect me to agree.

“Why?”

“Well, it would look really bad if you came home carrying a corpse over your shoulder, right? If I go away, all that’ll be left is a dead body, after all. It wouldn’t be good if people thought you were a murderer, right?”

Lutz and I are the only two people who use this warehouse, and both our families and the people from Benno’s shop know that the two of us came here today. If I were to lose consciousness and die here, it’s extremely likely that all of the blame would be put on Lutz. Even if it wasn’t, Lutz himself would know of his own sin, I think.

I, personally, was thinking of Lutz when I proposed that it would be better to do it at home, but Lutz acts as if this came entirely out of nowhere.

“Y-y-you, w-w-w-what are you saying?!”

Startled by my words, Lutz’s face goes completely stiff as he grows incredibly flustered. It seems that it was far beyond his expectations that Maine wouldn’t come back if I were to disappear.

“S-so, Maine isn’t here anymore?! She’s not coming back?!”

“Yeah, probably...”

I can’t describe it as anything else but “probably”. All I’m able to do is search through Maine’s memories. I’ve never been able to talk to her, and she’s never spoken up to demand her body back.

“Answer this!”

Lutz fixes a powerful glare on me, the picture of an ally of justice facing down a hated evil. I can’t help but smile a little when I realize that. This is so perfectly like him. His frail childhood friend, who he treated like his own sister, has been hijacked by me, a foul villain, and he is leaping to her defense, like the hero he is.

“What about that fever that Maine was talking about with Mister Otto and Master Benno? Did you make her fever eat her up?!”

I’m a little impressed that Lutz put together that Maine had been

swallowed whole by the fever that still lurks deep within me. I'm pretty sure he's not wrong, at least not about that part.

"You're about half right and half wrong. I also think that Maine was eaten away by the fever. Her last memories are all "it's hot", "help me", "it hurts", "make it stop", that's why. But I'm not the fever. It's eating me alive too."

"What are you saying?! Isn't this your fault?! Didn't Maine disappear because of you?! Say it!!"

Lutz grabs tightly onto my shoulders and starts shaking me. My thoughts thrown into disarray by agitation, the words "it's my fault," and "Maine disappeared because of me" bounce around endlessly in my head. Then something snaps.

"Like hell I actually wanted to come here and be Maine! I died, or at least I'm pretty sure I did, and then before I knew it I was this child. If I could have actually chosen where I was going to go, I'd pick a world with tons of books I could read, or maybe be an aristocrat in this world who could actually read, or even just a body that's healthier than this feeble, pathetically weak one! There is no way that I would ever have voluntarily picked a body that is plagued by an incurable disease that constantly threatens to strike me down with fever at any moment!"

The instant I so plainly say that I never wanted to become Maine, Lutz's face goes slack and hollow, and his hands loosen from my shoulders.

"You... didn't want to become Maine?"

"Would you, Lutz? In the beginning, just leaving the house left me out of breath, and I'd have to stay in bed the whole next day, you know? Even though I can finally make it out to the forest, I'm still growing so slowly, and even now if I make the slightest mistake my fever comes back..."

Lutz thinks about it for a little while, slowly shaking his head. The energy he had when he'd grabbed me has all vanished, and his troubled eyes drift off to the side.

"...You could be swallowed by the fever too?"

“Yeah, I think so. If I loosen the grip I have on it, it immediately rushes back out, and I start feeling like I’m being devoured. It’s something like being swallowed, or maybe like being dissolved... it’s difficult to explain.”

Lutz frowns as he mulls over my words. It seems like it’s also difficult to imagine, just from my explanation.

“That’s why,” I say, “if you’re not happy with the fact that I’m using Maine’s body, and if you think you want me to disappear, just say it. I can disappear whenever you want.”

Lutz, who just moments ago had been yelling at me to bring the real Maine back, stares at me with astonishment. His terrified expression is asking me what the hell I’m saying, which leaves me a little bewildered.

“...It’s better if I disappear, right?”

When I ask for confirmation, Lutz suddenly raises his eyebrows and starts shouting, as if he’s the one who should be angry at me, the victim.

“Don’t ask me! Why are you asking me?! It’s really weird to say that you’ll disappear if I tell you to!”

“It’s probably weird, yeah, but... if you weren’t here, I probably would have already disappeared a long time ago.”

Lutz looks like he has no idea what I’m talking about. I start to explain what happened the last time I nearly disappeared, thinking back to how it all began.

“Don’t you remember? When Mommy burned my mokkan, how I collapsed?”

“Yeah...”

With an “oh, that’s right, that happened, didn’t it” expression, Lutz nods. To him, that hadn’t been a big deal, but to me it was an enormous turning point in my life.

“Back then, I was thinking I should just let my self be swallowed up. I really was planning to disappear. I didn’t have any lingering attachments to this world without books, and no matter how hard I tried I wasn’t ever

able to finish anything, so I was thinking I might as well give up.”

Lutz gulps nervously, so loudly I can hear it. He looks at me, silently urging me to continue, so I gently close my eyes and remember. As I was drowning in the heat, amidst the faces of my family dimly projected across my consciousness, Lutz’s face unexpectedly had risen to the surface.

“When I was being swallowed by the fever, I could see my family’s faces, but then suddenly I saw your face, and I wondered why you were there too. I focused on that, and gathered up my strength to drag my consciousness back from the fever. When I saw you really were there, I was a little surprised, you know?”

“That’s... you can’t seriously have come back because you were surprised that you saw me, and not a family member?”

He frowns, sighing, and I gently shake my head at him.

“What brought me back was that I was surprised to see you, but then you said that you were going to go get me some bamboo, so that my mother wouldn’t burn it? That made me think that I should hold on for a little bit longer, that I should fight back against the fever.”

“Your mom burned the bamboo too, didn’t she?”

I nod. I can still clearly recall the anger and chagrin that pierced through me, leaving me with that deep despondency. Even just remembering it makes me feel like the fever within me is growing more powerful.

“If everything really is awful, and I don’t actually care about anything anymore, I was thinking, then the fever will just rush in and carry me away. I didn’t care enough to fight back anymore, so dying like that might have been a relief, but... then I remembered our promise.”

“Our promise?”

“I don’t remember a promise,” he mumbles to himself. He looks up and to the side, as if he really doesn’t remember and is having to dig through his memories. Of course. I smile a little to myself. To Lutz, all he had been trying to say was that I’d better get well soon. Even so, those words were the all-important lifeline to which I clung.

“I promised I’d introduce you to Mister Otto. Didn’t you say that the bamboo was advance payment for the favor, so I had to get better?”

Perhaps he remembered something that he didn’t want to, but when he hears me clearly identify him as the source of my last lingering attachment to this world, he groans in embarrassment, holding his head in his hands.

“Th... that was! I wasn’t trying to make you feel like you owed me... aaargh, no!”

“Then, what were you trying to say?”

“Don’t ask! Nothing! Forget about it!”

I want to play the straight man in to Lutz’s completely unforeseen reaction, but right now I’m supposed to be being blamed. As Lutz requests, I pretend that nothing’s happening.

“Ummm, well, I remembered the promise like that, and then I also thought that I really shouldn’t disappear without returning at least one favor, after everything you did for me, so I worked hard to push the fever back, and, um...”

“...”

“So we met Mister Otto and Mister Benno, and I kept my promise, and then we made paper, so even though I want to make a book if I can, I think it’s okay if I disappear now, if you want me to?”

Lutz looks at me with a face like he’s swallowed a bug. He looks me up and down, with eyes that wouldn’t miss even the slightest lie, then hangs his head limply.

“Since when...”

“Um, what?”

I can’t hear anything he’s saying as he mumbles with his head hung low, so I tilt my head curiously to one side and ask him to repeat himself. Lutz raises his head and stares at me dead on.

“Since when have you been Maine?”

“...When do you think? When do you think that I wasn’t the Maine you knew anymore?”

I may have answered his question with another question, but Lutz doesn’t get angry. Instead, he looks vacantly off into the sky, thinking deeply. He looks back down at me, mutters something too quietly for me to hear, then looks down at his feet, kicking at the dirt with his shoe.

“...That,” he says, pointing at my hairpin. “Was it about when you started wearing that?”

I didn’t expect him to guess quite so accurately, but it’s true, I’m the only one who wears my hair with a hairpin like this. If my hair weren’t so silky and straight, liable to come loose no matter how many times and how tightly I’d tie it, I’d probably be wearing it normally, tied back with a string.

“...Correct.”

“That’s basically a year ago!” he yells, with such force that spittle flies from his mouth. His eyes flare wide open with rage.

Come to think of it, I became Maine at about the end of autumn. Right now it’s about halfway through the autumn, so soon the seasons will have come all the way around once.

“Yeah, I guess that’s right. Most of what I remember is being stuck in bed with a fever, but it’s been about a year.”

My memories of over half of the time I’ve been living in this world have been of being feverish and bedridden, but if you compare that to the Maine of before who spent the vast majority of her time stuck in bed, I’m remarkably energetic.

“...Has your family noticed?”

“I have no clue. I know they notice I’ve been doing some strange things, but I wonder if they really haven’t even considered that I’m not actually Maine?”

I especially can’t think that Tory and my mother, who had to spend so

much time looking after Maine while she was secluded in the house, haven't noticed anything at all. However, they haven't said anything about it, and I haven't either. Living like that is very practical, so I think it's more-or-less okay.

"Also, Daddy said that he's overjoyed just that his daughter is starting to get healthier."

"...I see."

Lutz lets out a long sigh, then turns his back on me as if to say the conversation is over. He runs a fingertip along one of the pages of paper clinging to the board, checking it to see how well it's drying. I had been fully prepared to disappear, but when this conversation ended without a satisfying conclusion, I can't help but be troubled about how my future is going to play out.

"Hey, Lutz..."

"...I think your family should decide, not me."

He interrupts me before I have a chance to finish. He's saying that my family should be the ones to decide whether or not I should disappear. However, if that's the case, then nothing will actually change for me right now.

"So, should we keep going like this for now?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

I don't know what Lutz is really thinking, since he's not looking over here. Does he not particularly mind that I, who am not Maine, am going to continue living like this for the time being?

"And that's okay?"

"Like I said, that's not something I should be deciding..."

Lutz stubbornly refuses to look at me, so I reach out and grab his arm. I want to ask him how he feels about me, since I'm not Maine. But, if I avoid such a troubling topic of conversation and just maintain the status quo, I wonder if he'd be alright with that?

“Lutz, is it really okay if I don’t disappear? I’m not the real Maine, you know?”

Lutz’s arm twitches a little bit. I thought for a moment that his arm was trembling a little bit in my grip, but it was really my hand that was trembling.

“...It’s fine.”

“Why?”

As I ask him again, he finally turns around to look at me. With an expression somewhere between shock and amazement, he reaches up and flicks me on the forehead.

“If you disappear, Maine’s not coming back, right? Also, if you’ve been here for an entire year already, then you’re basically the Maine I know.”

He roughly scratches at his head as he speaks, messing up his golden hair. Then, he looks me firmly in the eyes. What I see reflected in the pale green of his eyes is calmness, the anger and threatening attitude from the beginning evaporating away. These are the eyes of the Lutz I’ve always known.

Because before, I hadn’t thought about exercising my body, so I was even weaker. Because if I counted the number of times I’ve actually come face-to-face with Lutz or Ralph, I wouldn’t need more than my two hands.

“...That’s why, it’s okay if you’re my Maine.”

When Lutz says that, something deep in my heart clicks into place. Something that had been fluttering about within me settles down with a thump. It really wasn’t a big change, so small that you couldn’t see it if you looked, but for me, it was the biggest, most important change in the world.

Chapter 36: Paper's Completion

“Aaaaaargh, it's ripping apart...”

“This one, too.”

The prototype paper we made out of tronbay worked out well, but batches we've been making to test other kinds of materials have not. I don't know if it's because the fibers aren't adhesive enough, or if they're too short, but they aren't tangling together very well, nor are they sticking together, so as the sheets dry out they start falling to pieces.

“I wonder if it would work better if we add more binding agent...? What do you think?”

“I think we've got no choice but to try whatever we can think of, one after the other.”

In order to make the fibers stick together more easily, we try adding more binding agent, and in order to make the paper less likely to tear, we try making it a little bit thicker.

“How about this?” I ask.

“I have no clue about how it'll turn out when it's dry, but it's coming together pretty well, I guess.”

The thicker, gluier paper dries rock hard, and when we try to peel it from the board it snaps in half. We stare, dumbfounded, at the fragments as they drop, one by one, to the ground.

“...That's a failure, huh.”

“Yeah, this one didn't tear, it... broke? It wasn't actually paper, at least.”

I don't know if the problem is with the ratio of fiber to binder to water, or if the raw materials themselves aren't right for the job. At one point, I'd read something about what kinds of vegetation could be made into paper, but in this world that sort of knowledge doesn't really apply. The failures have been accumulating, to the point where I want to scream, “how did this happen?!”

“This is just making me wish we could mass produce tronbay paper.”

“There’s no way!”

“Couldn’t we make something work as long as we had tronbay seeds?”

I think that, as long as we had some of those red fruit, harvesting enough tronbay would be easy enough, but Lutz shakes his head vigorously when I suggest it.

“Don’t search for them! Do you want to destroy the forest?!”

“If we found a seed, couldn’t we get everyone to quickly cut it all down as soon as it grew?”

I’m a not quite sure about this because I don’t know when tronbay actually grows, but when someone finds a seed they could gather a bunch of people to wait for it to sprout, then as soon as it does they could jump in and deal with it. However, Lutz rubs his forehead, insisting that it’s not a good idea.

“You have no idea when tronbay will grow! It’s too dangerous!”

“Ah, I see.”

It seems like I had stumbled across a tronbay seed that was coincidentally right on the verge of sprouting, but it turns out that tronbay don’t usually sprout immediately after you pick them up. Lutz is starting to get a little angry, so I decide to give up on using these mysterious pop-up trees.

“...Please learn how things work around here.”

“I’m trying, though!”

Since Urano’s memories from my previous life are crammed into my head far more firmly than those of Maine, who rarely left her house, no matter what the situation the raw evaluation criteria I wind up using is still always Urano’s. However, because Lutz and I have been discussing some of Maine’s memories, I’ve gradually started thinking of them a little more, and Lutz has been helping to correct my actions, too.

“Anyhow, using tronbay is dangerous. When tronbay starts sprouting, it

drains all the strength from the soil, so for a while after it sprouts nothing else can grow there. We can't mass-produce it."

"Whaaat?! It's that dangerous?! But nothing like that happened last time, right?"

"Didn't I say that was weird? Did you not hear me or something?"

"I don't know anything about normal tronbay, so I had no idea if anything about that was weird or not."

Tronbay has been the best material so far, but since it's such a dangerous plant, and since it only grows in the autumn, mass producing it would be impossible. Rather than wishing for something that doesn't exist, it's much more useful to be thinking about if there's something we can find that actually exists. So, we had no choice but to keep searching through trial and error.

While we were doing that, we had to consider whether any of the wood that we can easily find in the forest is actually something that's mass-producible. Also, we needed to think about the ratios of materials, try crushing the fibers more or less, using sulamo bugs instead of edil fruit for the binding agent, and so on, in order to try to make gradual improvements in the final product.

"Out of these, forin seems to be the best for this."

"Yeah. If we add just a little bit more sulamo glue to the forin, it looks like we get something good enough to sell."

When we tested the three soft woods that the lumberyard recommended to us, we found that forin was able to make the thinnest paper. Forin fibers, compared to those of the other two varieties, are a little stronger. This makes them harder to beat into shape, but the more we beat it, the more stickiness is released from the fibers. Once we discovered that, we were able to make a comparatively good paper by beating the fibers thoroughly. Then, when formulating the pulp, we tested gradual changes to the ratios of the various ingredients that we used until we found the best proportions we could.

I write down the proper ratios on my slate, then clap my hands together to shake the dust from them.

“I think we’ve got it now, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, if we make it like this, it looks like we can mass-produce it.”

Lutz’s face is bright now that we’ve found the proper ratios. I happily run a fingertip along the surface of our completed paper.

“Mass production is going to have to start in the spring, though. Getting more wood right now is going to be a huge pain, and bark in the winter is going to start getting tougher and tougher.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We’d make much better paper if we waited until spring arrived and the plants came to life again, then went to collect young trees and new branches. Besides, the weather is already such that bleaching the bark in the river is already a very painful process. I want to wait for it to get warm for Lutz’s sake, too.

“So, let’s get our finished paper over to Mister Benno as soon as possible. I’m going to have to start helping Mister Otto at the gate for the winter, after all.”

“Yeah. In a little bit we’re going to have to start preparing for the winter, so we should get this finished as fast as we can.”

“Right. Tomorrow I’ll go to the gate and ask Mister Otto about how to write a thank-you note. We were finally able to make paper! I want to show him my thanks.”

Lutz nods his agreement to my suggestion, as he starts gathering up the remains of today’s failed experiment.

“I’ll leave the thank you note to you, then. So, you’re going to be bringing today’s failed paper home with you?”

“Yeah. We’ll take the successful paper to Mister Benno, but I can use the botched paper, even if it has some holes or is peeling a little bit, to make a book.”

I've already confirmed with Mark that it's okay for me to bring home the large quantity of failed experiments. With this, I can finally start working on making a book. The next day, I return to the gate; my first time in a while. As winter accounting season comes around, all the necessary documents for processing the calculations have been gradually piling up, so Otto's face is positively radiant when he greets me.

"Hey there, Maine! I've been waiting."

He pats the accumulated pile of wooden cards sitting next to him, smiling brilliantly as he beckons to me. The cards are covered with totals of goods and quantities, and it looks like Otto is in the middle of writing everything out into the official documents.

As I help him out with that, I eventually try asking him about how to write a thank-you note.

"Mister Otto, if you could, I'd appreciate it if you could show me how to write a thank-you note."

"A thank-you note? Like what the noblemen exchange?"

Well, no, it doesn't have to be like what a noble does, I almost start to say, but I stop myself. Perhaps it really is a custom that only noblemen practice.

"Umm, I figured that since there are letters of introduction, then maybe there was a letter of thanks from the people who got introduced... was I wrong?"

"Well, I know that noblemen exchange those among each other, but it's not something that merchants explicitly write. It's a waste of paper to use it on something that's not a contract."

Of course, paper is such an expensive commodity that they wouldn't use it so lightly.

"Then, how should they send thanks?"

"For a trader, you usually give the other party something from what you trade in that they might find useful. It doesn't really matter if you have an

attendant deliver it or if you deliver it yourself, but you don't send a thank-you note, you send a gift."

I thought that there was going to be a general format for a thank you note, like there's one for a letter of introduction, and that I could write one on a sheet of our finished paper, but he's telling me that it's normal not to send a note, but instead to give a gift.

"...Whoa, I didn't expect that. Hey, Mister Otto. What do you think I should give to Mister Benno? I can't think of anything that Lutz or I could possibly send to him that he would want."

I really can't think of anything that I personally have that Benno might possibly be interested. Benno seems to be a man who has everything.

Otto shrugs his shoulders, then gives me some advice.

"Wouldn't the paper the two of you've made be a good gift? That's all you two trade in right? If it has value as a commodity, then showing Benno that his initial investment is paying off would be the best. Besides that... maybe information on some kind of new product... or something like that, I think."

"I understand. Thank you very much, Mister Otto."

Something to increase the value of the paper, or information about a new kind of good, huh... I might be able to come up with something like that.

The next day, I immediately rush to Lutz to propose to him my idea for the paper we should make to show Benno our thanks.

"It turns out that merchants don't say thanks by sending thank you notes. They give each other something that they think they'd like. So, I think we should make some special paper out of tronbay for him. We still have some tronbay inner bark, right?"

"Yeah. We should give Master Benno the best paper we can, shouldn't we? ...Hey, Maine, what've you got there? Leglas?"

He looks down at the red leaves I brought with me.

“Oh, is that what it’s called? I found it growing next to the well, so I picked some yesterday. I want to try doing something like pressing flowers, I think.”

“What are you going to do with those?”

“I’m going to use them to make paper, of course!”

Leglas is a plant that looks like a red clover. I thought that we might be able to put it in the pulp after we spread it out, substituting it for the maple leaves that would be used for that in washi. I make a message card with leaves arranged along the edges of the page, like a bookmark or a piece of nice stationery. I also cut up some of the leaves into smaller pieces, then scatter them on another page in a heart shape, making something kind of like chiyogami.¹

On the message card, I write “Because of you, Mister Benno, we were able to make this paper. Thank you very much.” Lutz and I sign our names at the bottom.

“This paper is really pretty,” says Lutz, looking at the other sheet.

“Since it’s got leglas in it, it’s kinda showy, like it’s got a picture drawn on it, you know?”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to make origami,” I reply.

“Oh-ree-gah-mee?”

I take the chiyogami-like paper I made and use my knife to cut it into a square, then fold it into a celebration crane.² In my old memories, shuriken patterns were the most popular with people from overseas, but I don’t know if anyone here has ever seen a throwing star before. I don’t have enough paper to make something large like an origami balloon, either.

A celebration crane is a simple, yet flashy design that I can make with a single sheet of paper. Since its tail spreads out wide, like a peacock, it’s far more extravagant than an ordinary crane.

“What do you think? Is this showy enough?”

“...Wh, whoa,” he says, timidly, lightly poking at the crane. “You can make paper do something like this? Man, I have no idea what you’re capable of, Maine.”

I’m a little taken aback by his reaction.

How much would a crane like this be worth?

“...Now that I think about it, making decorations out of paper would be super extravagant, wouldn’t it?”

“A~ah, w..., well, since it’s for Master Benno, it’s alright.”

I’d been thinking that origami was lighthearted, cheap, and comparatively unusual, so it would make a nice gift, but now that I’m actually thinking about how expensive paper is here, I’m wondering if I’ve just done something monumentally wasteful.

...I wonder if I should make sure to tell Benno that he can unfold it and still use the paper, despite the creases?

“I was also told that information about some kind of new product would be good...”

“You’ve got better ideas for that than me, right?” asks Lutz offhandedly, shoving the entire burden onto me.

It’s not that I have no ideas whatsoever, but I don’t know if any of them are actually at all salable, so I want to ask Lutz for his opinions.

“...When we first met Benno, he looked pretty interested in my hairpin, so I was wondering if we should teach him about those, but this,” I say, pointing at my head, “is basically just a wooden stick, isn’t it?”

Lutz gives a big nod. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just a stick.”

“You think he could sell them?”

“...People can make them themselves, so it’s not the kind of thing you’d really just go out and buy, I think?”

I’d thought that, even though it was unusual, it wouldn’t really be

salable, and Lutz seems to agree.

“If you want hairpins you can sell, how about that other kind? ...You know, like the one Tory wore during her baptism, or like that.”

“Lutz, you’re a genius! That got an amazing reaction back then, too! And I think making those would be great to do for our winter work, too.”

With this, we’ve completed our preparations for what we’re bringing to Benno. Next, we need to figure out the circumstances, then make some time with him to meet.

“Hey, Lutz. When you go return the lock today, could you ask Mister Mark what Mister Benno’s schedule looks like?”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

On the day that we arranged with Mark, Lutz and I head to Benno’s shop, bringing with us the completed paper. Our finished product has both tronbay-and forin-based papers, each in three different thicknesses, for a total of six different varieties. With that, we also are bringing the message card and origami celebratory crane, into which leglas has been pressed for color. I also have Tory’s hairpin in my tote bag as well, so that we can consult with him about it.

“Good morning, Mister Benno. We’ve finished a prototype of our paper, and have brought it with us. We were able to finish it so quickly thanks to your generous initial investment.”

“I heard about it from Otto, but you’re done already?”

“Yes, sir. Here it is.”

I draw the sheets of paper from my tote bag, then arrange them on Benno’s desk in front of him. When he sees them, he looks at them with slight amazement, then reaches out for the first sheet.

“Well now, let’s take a look.”

He holds it up to the light and tests it for feel, then takes out a bottle of ink. He tears off the top part of one of the sheets, then draws a line across it with his pen.

“...This is good for writing on. The nib doesn’t get caught in this as easily as in parchment, so it’s easy to write... though the ink is spreading just a little bit. Not enough to make a difference though... hmm!”

“Did we do it?!” I ask. “Can Lutz be your apprentice?”

Benno strokes his chin, grinning broadly as he reaches for the next sheet.

“Yeah, I did promise that, after all. How many of these can you make?”

“Ummm, since this is just a prototype, if we start making it for real, I want to use larger tools. I think that these sheets are a little too small. What would be the best size of sheet for us to be making?”

The letters of introduction I saw at the gate were all different sizes, so I don’t know what the standard would actually be for making paper. If we were to be making paper the same size as actual washi, the paper frame we’d need would be far too large, and it would take a tremendous amount of strength to spread out the pulp evenly over it. If Lutz and I aren’t able to make consistent, quality paper at that scale, there’s no point in trying, so I want to focus on mass-producing paper of the most widely-used size.

“...Hm, let me see. For letters of introduction and contracts, we usually use sheets about this size. It’s not a precise standard, though.”

The sheet of parchment that Benno pulled out from the shelves behind him is sized somewhere between an A4 or a B4 sheet of paper.³ It’s a size big enough that we can still swing the paper frame by hand.

“Okay, I’d like to make another paper frame, of about that size. Although, it’s only going to be practical to make paper again in the springtime. For now, we really can’t keep getting raw materials.”

“Just get all your tools in order by springtime, then. Work with Mark on that. This’ll be a great product once you’ve done that.”

“Yes, sir!”

Benno’s given his approval of our paper. Thrilled that our hard work has finally paid off, I exchange a look with Lutz, smiling broadly.

“This is a much higher-quality paper, huh.”

The sheet he currently holds in his hands is one of the ones made from tronbay. At a single glance, the difference in quality is obvious. It is both much whiter and much smoother.

“This was made using tronbay.”

“Did you say tronbay?!”

Benno’s head snaps up, startled, and he looks back and forth between me and Lutz. It looks like tronbay really is famous for being such a dangerous plant. I take a step back, letting Lutz give the explanation as to what happened so that I don’t inadvertently say something foolish. Lutz, reading my intentions perfectly, takes a step forward, opening his mouth to speak.

“While we were gathering things in the forest, Maine stumbled across tronbay that had just started growing, which is how we got this. It’s very dangerous to get, though, and finding it is unreliable, so I think it will be very rare for us to make.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense... Still, tronbay, huh...”

Benno seems to be frantically thinking if there’s anything he might be able to do to make mass-production of this happen. Despite the fact that he’s making that calculating merchant’s expression, it seems that this is the rare case where he can’t actually come up with a way to get what he wants.

“After several tests, we determined that tronbay was the material that made the best quality material, but we can’t make it into a commodity if we can’t actually acquire the raw ingredients. Also, this paper here is made from forin. Since forin is much easier to find, it’s much better suited towards mass-production, and thus commoditization.”

“Ah, I see,” says Benno, nodding vigorously. “Forin is definitely much better for production.”

Since it seems that the paper has met his satisfaction, next I take out the thank-you gifts.

“Now, this is... a thank-you note, to you, Mister Benno. I heard from Mister Otto that the best way to thank you would be to show you how we could add value to the paper we’ve made, so we tried making a special paper for you.”

“A thank-you note? I’ve given these to some high-ranking noblemen, but this is the first time I’ve gotten one myself. How do I say this... I feel like I’m moving up in the world.”

Benno smiles broadly as he takes the message card from me. When he opens it to look inside, his eyes go just a little bit wider.

“Um,” I say, “while we were making this page, we added leglas to the mixture. ...What do you think?”

“Ah? When you say ‘leglas’, you’re talking about that weed that sprouts here and there around this time of year? ...When you see it like this, it’s rather beautiful. This would be quite popular with the noblewomen and their daughters, I think.”

Benno, as a merchant, is very reliable: as soon as he saw that, his thoughts immediately went to trade. He looked at it with his merchants eyes and judged it as something that he could sell to the nobility. I’m sure that we’ve successfully shown to him that we’ve managed to add some additional value to this paper.

“Ummm, and I don’t know whether to say that this is a thank-you, or a gift, but... this is a decoration that I made from paper. It’s called a ‘celebration crane’.”

“Hoh! This is paper, too?”

I take the folded crane from my bag, spread its tail back out, and set it on the desk in front of him. He reaches over to pick it up, his eyes gleaming. He turns it over in his hands, looking at it from all angles, but no matter how hard he looks, he won’t find any use for it besides as a decoration.

“After I made it, I realized that I’d just done something very extravagant. It doesn’t have any use other than as a decoration. Um, though, since the paper is only folded, you can use it as regular paper again if you unfold it,

although there will still be creases.”

“No, it’s just fine being a decoration, isn’t it? This seems like a good advertisement for the paper I’ll be selling in my shop.”

Benno places the crane on one of the shelves behind him, murmuring that once he starts selling paper he’ll need to move it to those shelves instead. It seems like the little crane will be living on a shelf for a while. Honestly, I had no idea that origami was going to be this well-received. In retrospect, I’m actually a little glad I made it.

“To be honest,” says Benno, “I didn’t think you could make paper out of wood. The quality is also far beyond what I was expecting it to be, if you even could. This, however, is more than good enough to sell as a commodity. Well done! I’m looking forward to seeing you start mass-producing this in the spring.”

When Benno delivers his high valuation of our efforts, Lutz and I grab each other’s hands joyfully. Thinking back on all the time we spent gradually improving the quality of the product, I’m suddenly moved to tears.

“We did it, Maine!”

“It’s ‘cause you worked so hard, Lutz.”

Benno smiles wryly at the two of us, stacking the paper back up on top of his desk.

“I’ll buy this paper from you today. I’ll pay you on the way out, so call Mark for me?”

“Really?!”

Now that I think about it, we had talked about how, before our baptism, we would get to keep the money from selling the paper, minus material and handling fees.

Finally, my first real cash!

If we turn the rest of our processed white bark into paper now, then we can probably sell that too. As soon as I think that, I suddenly remember

something else, and I take Tory's hairpin, which I wanted to talk about selling, from my bag.

"...Also, I had something I wanted to consult with you about; do you think that this is something that we could sell?"

I place the hairpin that Tory had used as a hair ornament on top of Benno's desk. It's a short wooden pin, decorated with a bouquet of small blue and yellow flowers.

For some reason, Benno's face twitches and goes very stiff as soon as he sees the hairpin.

"Young lady, what is this?"

"It's a hair ornament. After someone ties her hair back normally with a string, she can then use this to decorate it. ...Like this."

To demonstrate, I swap out Tory's hairpin for my own and show it to him.

"This particular one is something that I made for my older sister's baptismal ceremony, so I can't sell it, but if I make more decorations like this while I'm doing my winter handiwork, do you think I could be able to sell them?"

As I ask my question, Benno keeps his glittering eyes fixed on the hairpin. In a low voice, he growls out an answer.

"...You could."

"Then, I think I will. Then, um. Mister Benno, I'll let you sell them for me, so would it maybe be possible for you to provide the initial investment for these too, please?"

He lets a loud, long sigh, then looks me in the eyes. He suddenly seems very, very tired, but I wonder if I'm just imagining it?

"What on earth do you need?"

"Just thread. The quality doesn't need to be particularly high, but I'd like as many different colors as possible, please."

Making every single one of them using the same colors would be very boring. Besides, I'm sure that everyone is going to want to pick ones with colors that match them the best, so it's a good idea to have as many colors and designs as possible.

"Just thread? Nothing else?"

"I'd be happy if we could get a little wood, but since we're already going to be gathering a lot of firewood for the winter, we don't particularly need it."

"And you're doing all this yourself, young lady?"

Benno glances at me, scowling. Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure we're in a "Maine thinks, Lutz makes" kind of situation. Perhaps it would be best for Lutz to help out as well.

"...Lutz will handle the woodworking portion, and I plan on handling the rest. Of course, we'll be making them together. Right, Lutz?"

"Right," he says, gripping my hand tightly as he nods frantically. "I'll handle the wood parts."

Benno scrutinizes us carefully, looking like he has something he wants to say, but then sits back, covering it up with a forced, happy smile.

"Well, sounds good to me. So, you two, do you have some time and energy to move around a bit?"

"Yes, we do."

"Alright. So, let's head to the Merchant's Guild, shall we?"

"The Merchant's Guild?!"

Whoa, once again, some new vocabulary just showed up. I wonder, is this going to be like a medieval European guild, or a fantasy world guild...? What the heck kind of place is this going to be?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Chiyogami is brightly-colored, patterned paper used for a variety of

decorative purposes. It's typically made by applying a pattern to the paper using ink applied either through wood block printing or through silkscreening.

2. Celebration cranes are very showy origami cranes with wide tails folded so that both sides of the paper, which are usually different colors, are outwardly visible.

3. For American audiences, A4 paper is slightly skinnier and slightly taller than letter paper (8.3" x 11.7") and B4 paper is about as tall as legal paper but somewhat wider (9.8" x 13.9").

Chapter 37: The Merchant's Guild

"By the way, Mister Benno," I say. "What is the Merchant's Guild?"

Finding out all of the little details that are different from what I think I know is my top priority.

"What, you don't know?"

"I've never been to it. Lutz, do you know about it?" "It's a place where people who do business go, maybe?"

I asked Lutz just in case this was something that any child in this town should know about, but all I got out of him was what I was expecting. Benno sighs lightly, then starts to explain.

"...Well, that's about right. Its main job is to do things like grant permits to people who want to open new shops or punish people who are doing bad business. If you don't have the guild's approval, you can't run a shop and you can't open a stall in the town market. Also, every person involved in a business must be registered; if they aren't, the guild lays down very harsh penalties."

Based on what I'm hearing from Benno, I guess it might be something like a department of commerce? You can't open a shop without getting approval, and you have to register new apprentices there, so I don't think I'm too far off the mark.

"They sound like they're a very powerful organization," I say. "That's right. They're very powerful, and very greedy. When you register an apprentice, there's a registration fee. When you start a new business, there's a very large registration fee. No matter what you do, they take a commission from it."

It looks like things are the same whenever money is involved, no matter what world you live in. This is a terrible world for a poor person to live in.

"Either way, once the baptismal ceremony is over, my new apprentices are registered here, since everyone working at my store is involved in trade. In your case, you'll need a provisional registration until your actual

baptism. If you don't, then you won't be able to sell your paper or your hair ornaments... or any kind of good."

"So, in order to buy the paper from us today, you need us to be registered first?" "Right."

Ah, I see. His rush to get us registered is so that he can purchase our prototype paper. I chuckle to myself, pleased that I figured that out. Benno, however, gets a stern look on his face, his eyebrows knotting together.

"I'd really like to get you through registration quickly, but that old bastard is going to get involved. Every time, that man never fails to find some bone to pick."

"Like what?"

Benno's brought out some less-than-friendly language. I thought that he'd be fairly high up in the guild himself; was I wrong? Or, perhaps, is there some sort of inter-factional dispute happening here?

"Right now, I've got a lot of momentum going, expanding on a few different ventures so I can grow my shop. It's only natural that the guild chief would want to tear me down a little, you know? So, you two, don't say anything unnecessary, got it?"

"Yes, sir," I say, in unison with Lutz. Two highly skilled merchants are about to engage in a battle of wits against each other. I have no plans to stick my nose in where it doesn't belong.

"Ah, that's right. Maine, about that hairpin you brought..."

"This one?" I say, opening my bag slightly to show it to him. He nods, then fixes his sharp, reddish-brown eyes on me. "How long does it take you to make one?" "If I already have all the materials, and Lutz makes the wooden part, then after that, if my physical condition is good... ummm, this flower part, if I work really hard I can do it in a day, probably... I guess..."

It depends on the actual quantity of flowers, but at my speed it's a day's worth of work. My mother, though, who is good at sewing, could probably

do it in about two bells' worth of time.

"How about you, Lutz?" asks Benno. "It's just carving and polishing some wood, so it'll take me about one bell, I think?"

"Hmm! That's great," he says, good-naturedly.

Benno's tone of voice may be light and pleasant, but his eyes glitter with a sharp light.

"What's so great?" I ask. "I'm looking forward to what's coming up after this," he replies, smiling the same vicious smile a predator makes when it's found its next target, his eyes locked on the Merchant's Guild building as it comes into view.

The Merchant's Guild is in a tall building on a street corner that overlooks the town's central plaza. Just that alone shows that it is a very wealthy organization, but on top of that, not a single room in the entire building has been rented out to anyone else. The entire building is the Merchant's Guild's alone.

"When I think about how much of my hard-earned money gets funneled into this building," muses Benno, "I can't help but get a little mad, you know?"

"That's true, but if you didn't, you'd be in big trouble, wouldn't you?"
"Yep. And that makes me even madder."

Before the door stand two guards, each carrying weapons. As we approach, they look us up and down, then ask us what our business is here.

"What are you here for?"

"Getting temporary registrations for these two," replies Benno. "Head on in," says the guard, opening the door for us.

As soon as we step through the doorway, we're suddenly faced with a flight of stairs, and I'm momentarily bewildered. While the staircase itself is wide, there's no sign of the first floor at all.

"Mister Benno, what happened to the first floor?"

“Ahh, the first floor is for the traders to park their wagons and carts. It would be a huge nuisance if they all were lined up on the street outside. If you go around back, you should be able to see them.”

We ascend to the second floor, entering a large hall, packed full of people constantly rushing about. I can't help but be amazed by the overwhelming clamor. I hadn't thought this town had this kind of people in it, until now. I feel a strange sort of admiration.

“We don't have anything to do here,” says Benno. “We're heading to the stairs on the other side so we can get up to the third floor.”

Since I'm still being carried in Benno's arms, I'm relatively safe as we make our way through the crowd towards the stairway, but Lutz, following behind us, keeps almost getting crushed in the crowd.

“Lutz, are you alright?” I ask. “I'm fine, yeah... This is kinda like a festival, huh.”

“That's because this is the place where both people who want to open stalls in the town market and traders who want to do business in this town have to come to get official permission,” says Benno. “The closer it gets to market, the busier it gets. After the market closes, it'll be quiet for a while.” “Huh...”

The stairs we arrive at are sealed tightly behind a metal fence. In front of it stand yet more guards.

“May I see your registration card, please?” Benno pulls out some sort of metallic-looking card and hands it to the guard. “The three of us are going up.”

“Understood, sir.”

For some reason, the guard holds the card up high. Suddenly, a brilliant white light runs along the bars of the fence, and it disappears into the ground as if it were melting away.

“Wha-?! What's that!!” I ask, my eyes wide. “A magical tool. Lutz, don't let go of my hand. You'll be pushed back if you do.”

“G... got it.”

Benno carries me with one arm, taking Lutz’s hand in the other, and starts to ascend the staircase.

“Didn’t you say that magic was something that only the nobility could use?” I ask. “The upper levels of this organization are pretty well-connected with the nobility. There’s quite a lot of noblemen who’d give out magical tools like this if they thought it would give them some kind of advantage.”

“It’s my first time seeing anything like this...”

I’m struck by the same thought as I had back when I saw the contract magic. Somehow, I’ve found myself in a world that’s even more fantastical than I thought.

When we reach the top of the stairs, Benno lets go of Lutz’ hand and sets me down. White walls extend past the stairway for a ways, until they arrive at a place in the back that looks something like a counter. While the second story handled business relating to the town market, the third story deals with the merchants who own shops. Compared to the second story, it is much quieter, and there are far fewer people here.

The floor of the second story was made of wood and slightly dirty, with small piles of dust accumulating in the corners. The third story, however, is carpeted, and swept scrupulously clean. The furniture is also well-maintained here, further emphasizing that this place has plenty of money. This is, in a single glance, a stunning example of how stratified this society is.

“There are conference rooms on the other side of these walls,” says Benno, pointing at the white walls. “You two won’t have much need to use them.”

As he explains things, we start walking towards the counter. Lutz and I hold each other’s hands, feeling slightly nervous in the face of the kind of wealth that we don’t ordinarily see in our daily lives.

Passing the conference rooms, I can see that the counters stretch wall-

to-wall, behind which children, perhaps apprentices, seem to be processing the income and expenditures of the Merchant's Guild, reading from wooden notes and performing computations on their manual calculators.

"Lutz," I whisper, "this winter you really need to learn how to read and do math."

"...Yeah, I really do."

Partway down the corridor, on this side of the counter, there's something that looks like a sofa in what appears to be a waiting area, or perhaps a reception area where one could be invited to relax. I turn around, surveying my surroundings. I notice, against one wall, a set of shelves on which a variety of wooden cards and rolls of parchment have been arranged.

"Is that... is that a bookshelf?!"

My energy level suddenly skyrockets. Benno looks down at me with curiosity in his eyes, then nods.

"Yeah, those are bookshelves. They contain copies of the regulations that apply to shops, simple maps of the surrounding area, almanacs of the nobility, and so on. ...Are you interested?"

"I am! I am!!"

I want to immediately charge towards the bookshelves, but Lutz's grip on my hand is like a vise, squeezing so tightly that I can't get away. Watching me struggle, a wry smile tugs at the corners of Benno's mouth.

"You can take a look after we've gotten your application filled out. It'll probably be a long wait, after all."

"Really?! Yaaay!" "Maine," says Lutz, "calm down. You're getting too excited."

I've finally found book-like things that are okay for me to read, do you think I can possibly contain myself? No, I absolutely cannot. Lutz's warning technically does register in my ears, but it's nowhere near enough

to stop the wild dancing of my heart.

At least, that's what I thought, until Lutz says something that forces me to stop dead in my tracks.

"If you get too excited, you'll faint before you get a chance to read anything."

...That would be terrible!

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with some amusement, notices that this is a good breaking point. "Come," he says, continuing to walk towards the counter. As we approach, an employee that seems to be familiar with Benno looks up, an ingratiating smile on her face.

"Oh, good afternoon, Master Benno. How may I be of service today?"

"I'm here for temporary registration for these two. Can you handle both of them for me?" "Temporary registration? ...These aren't your children, are they?" "They're not. But, I need them registered. Quickly, please."

It seems that a temporary registration is effectively a loophole in the regulations, where the children of merchants can be allowed to help out with the family business even though they're unbaptized and, by all rights, should not be allowed to be working, let alone be registered. Since it's impossible to hire a child that hasn't yet been baptized, children who aren't directly related to a merchant would thus have no actual reason to be involved in any transactions. As such, it's impossible that a temporary registration would be granted to a child that isn't a blood relative of a merchant.

Although she squints dubiously at us, she dutifully begins to ask me and Lutz a series of questions, writing something down on the other side of the counter. From what I'd heard so far, I had been thinking this would be a long, bureaucratic process, but this is just simple data entry: our names, our fathers' names, where we live, our ages.

"The son of a carpenter and the daughter of a soldier, is it?"

When she finishes her questions, her expression grows all the more dubious as she looks back and forth between the two of us. It seems that

she's searching for some reason why we should be registered, even though we're not the children of merchants. Her eyes are not exceptionally pleasant.

"That's right," says Benno. "If you're done with the questions, let's move this along. I don't think either of us have much free time to spare on this."

"Very well, I'll be back shortly. Please, feel free to sit over there while you wait."

She gestures towards the reception area. I'm nearly crushed by my desire to immediately run off to the bookshelves, but I instead look up at Benno.

"While we wait, may I look at the bookshelves?"

"Sure. If there's anything you'd like to know, I can show you. Come and wait over here. Lutz, don't let her out of your sight." "Got it."

Lutz and I calmly walk to the bookshelves, his hand clamped firmly around mine. I go through the contents of the shelves, unrolling the parchment scrolls and glancing through the stacks of wooden cards, looking to see what kind of information they contain. It's all eminently practical information: maps and illustrated references, almanacs of the nobility, rules of business, block-printed news sheets with information from nearby areas, and so on.

"Whoa, look at this map!"

It's a particularly rough and sketchy map, but this is the first time I've gotten a look at what this world looks like. I have no idea where even we currently are on this, so I tuck the scroll under my arm and head to the sofa where Benno is currently sitting. I sit down on the sofa in the manner in which one usually sits down on a sofa, only to realize that this beautiful cloth surface is, in fact, merely a piece of cloth attached to the hard boards of the wooden bench underneath. It has none of the softness or flexibility I was expecting, so instead my butt slams hard into the unyielding surface.

"Owww..."

"How excited do you have to be to throw yourself into a chair like that."

Are you an idiot?”

I whimper softly as Benno stares at me with frank amazement. I was deceived by something that looked like a luxurious sofa in this strange environment, you know! If I had been able to see the wood this is made of, I wouldn't have thrown myself into it like that. I keep these excuses in my heart, though, as I spread the map wide on the cloth-covered surface of the bench we are sitting on.

“Mister Benno, where's this town on here?”

“Right here. Ehrenfest. That's the family name of the lord of the land, so that's the name of the town.”

This is the first time I've heard the name of this town. Come to think of it, this is the first time I've heard the name of the lord, too. Since there's not been any reason for me to go outside the town, there's never been any need for me to learn its name, and whenever people refer to the lord they just refer to him by his title.

Looking at the map, it seems that there is an agricultural village and a forest to the south of Ehrenfest, and if you go beyond that, there's another small town. To the west, there's a large river, with another town belonging to the neighboring province relatively close by. Since the lords of those provinces share a good relationship, it seems that it's popular to come and go between those two cities. To the north is the aristocratic town where the feudal lord resides, so there's a large blank area. To the east, a major highway stretches, where it appears the largest number of traders operate.

“Well, when you two wind up going outside the town to do any purchasing, you're probably not going to need to go off this map, anyway.”

After Benno teaches us the names of a few of the other towns on the map, I return the map to the shelves, and once again start going through every last document on the shelves. On the very bottommost shelf, there are books that seem to be intended for apprentices to learn how to read words and numbers. Lutz and I flip through it to study its contents. In addition to the words I already know, I see quite a few more vocabulary words relating to commerce. I want some time to memorize all of these.

“Mister Benno, could we maybe get a slate and a calculator so that Lutz can study...?”

“Sure, I’ll take the cost out of your pay today and get those for you. Study hard, kid.” “By the way, could you tell me something, please? When a merchant’s kid becomes an apprentice, how well can they read, write, and do math already?”

After we’re baptized, the two of us will be working as apprentices with the children of merchants. Until then, we need to do as much as we can to make sure that we can do all of the things that they can do.

“They can read and write simple things and do basic calculations. For reading, they mostly know the names and related words of the goods their family trades in. For math, they know how to do the conversions between copper and silver coins, too.”

This is bad. I don’t really know anything about the local currency. I already know that large and small copper coins exist, as well as small silver coins, but I don’t know what the exchange rate between them is, nor their actual market value.

After all, at my house, all we really use is copper.

I don’t think I’ve ever really seen many coins that weren’t made of copper. Also, when I’m doing my work at the gate, I’m only working with raw numbers. Otto handles all of the actual money, and I haven’t really seen him do it.

“I think where the two of you are most lacking is knowing how to treat customers. The other children have watched their parents at work every single day, so it’s basically instinct for them by now.”

“That’s...”

That’s impossible for the two of us. In Japan, I was only ever on the receiving side of customer service, and never actually stood behind the register myself. Lutz, as well, probably knows nothing that a merchant might actually know.

What should we do?

Before I can fall too deeply into a labyrinth of thought, the employee behind the counter calls out to us.

“Master Benno, the guild leader would like to meet with you.”

“...As expected of that old bastard,” he mutters, in a voice so low that only we can hear it.

He stands up from his seat, eyes glittering coldly, his hands tightly balled into fists, the very picture of a man preparing to head into battle.

“Let’s go, you two.”

“Yes, sir.”

Benno starts heading towards the counter. With a clink, the closest panel to us on the counter falls to one side, opening a path for us to go through. On the other side is another staircase, at the top of which is a door that opens automatically for us. Through it lies a room that, although it’s not particularly large, seems very comfortable.

A fire is already burning brightly in the fireplace, spreading warm light across the carpet. On top of that carpet stands an official-looking desk, with a gentle-looking old man who, despite seeming to be in his fifties, still possesses a somewhat decent physique. Since “guild leader” sounds very much like a purely managerial position, I had been imagining a much more grandfatherly type, but I can see that this man has not yet aged past the prime of his life.

“Hey there, welcome,” he says, standing up from behind his desk with a warm, genial smile. “I’m glad I could get a chance to chat with you.

“Now then, Benno, let me get straight to the point. Why on earth are you asking for a temporary registration for these two kids, who aren’t even your blood relatives? This isn’t at all like when someone managing a street stall comes to ask for permission for their kid to watch the shop for them from time to time, am I right?”

A crafty smile crosses the guild leader’s face, silently telling us that Benno’s insistence that the two of us be immediately registered without first waiting for our baptismal ceremony is basically exactly the same

thing as him saying that the two of us possess some sort of goods that it is worth getting us registered for.

“...If I don’t know what you’re trying to do,” he says, “I can’t give permission to get these kids registered, you know. There’s no precedent at all here in Ehrenfest for registering kids that aren’t blood relatives.”

The guild leader looks the both of us over, with a contemplative smile that is completely impossible for me to read. His smile and his general demeanor seemed quite friendly at first glance, but this man is truly not friendly at all. After all, he just threatened us with rejection if Benno doesn’t immediately answer his question.

Seeing the guild leader waiting expectantly for an answer is making me grow increasingly nervous, so I look up at Benno to see how he’s taking it. However, Benno wears the darkly triumphant look of a man who feels absolutely assured of his victory.

“You want to know what these two kids have that I want, yeah?” he says, smiling broadly. “Yeah, I guess I do. Since it’s a thing, after all, any store could probably trade them, after all. Your shop is starting to reach a little too wide, I’m thinking.”

If it’s something that could make some real money, he wants a chance to seize it, he’s saying. Mister, shouldn’t you be at least trying to hide your real intentions?

“These kids have said they want to sell things through my shop, so they’re going to sell them through my shop. Right, Maine? Am I right, Lutz?”

We’re still scared of accidentally saying something unnecessarily, like Benno warned us not to do, so the two of us gulp, then nod emphatically. Benno smiles even more brightly, then looks down at me.

“Maine, please show the guild leader the hairpins that you’d like to start selling at my shop.”

“...Understood, sir.”

It seems that Benno still intends to keep our new paper trade secret for

now. I don't know what thought process he took to arrive at this conclusion, but since I don't want to say anything I shouldn't, I keep my mouth firmly shut as I reach into my tote bag. I pull out Tory's hairpin, and hold it out for the guild leader to see.

Chapter 38: The Guild Leader and the Hairpin

“This...” murmurs the guild leader, transfixed.

The guild leader’s captivated by this, is he okay?

While I may be worried, Benno is clearly not. A terrifying expression flickers across his face, like a carnivore licking his chops, before it settles back into his usual darkly pleasant smile.

“Is this not the hairpin you’ve been searching for, Guild Leader?”

“You’re selling this?!” asks the guild leader, his eyes wide, looking back and forth between me and Benno. There isn’t a trace of a smile on his face anymore as he looks at us hungrily. Terrified, I can’t stop my breath from catching in my throat.

...Lutz, no fair! You’re hiding behind Benno!

I turn slightly to try to creep behind Benno as well, but he firmly clasps my shoulder, dragging me back to the forefront.

“Umm,” I stammer, “I was planning on making these during my winter work.”

“Your winter work... then, could you sell me that one right now?”

He reaches out as if to take Tory’s hairpin from me. His blazing eyes tell me that if he gets his hands on it I’ll never get it back, so I frantically shove it back into my bag.

“I can’t do that,” I say. “This is something I made for Tory. It’s not for sale.”

“I’ll buy it for this much,” he says, his hand coming up in a flash, three fingers standing straight up. That’s probably some sort of sign to indicate a value, but I don’t know what exactly it means.

Flustered, I look up at Benno for advice.

“Hmm, I see...” he says, grinning broadly. “If we could ask for a little

more, we might be able to make one in advance especially for you, sir. What do you think, Maine?”

“It’s... it’s just like Mister Benno says, sir.”

As if I could possibly refuse. I force a smile onto my face and comply with his implicit order.

“If she starts now,” he says, “She should have plenty of time to complete it before your granddaughter’s baptismal ceremony this winter. Isn’t that right, Maine?”

“Yes, more than enough time.”

...Ah, now I see. During the summer’s baptismal ceremony, the guild leader’s granddaughter must have seen Tory’s hairpin and said that she wanted something just like it.

With that one statement, everything finally snaps into place. As the leader of the Merchant’s Guild, this man would be the most informed person in the entire city about the flow of merchandise through the markets, but even so, he couldn’t find a trace of this hairpin. Since it’s something I made entirely in-house, solely for Tory, it was never on the market, and nothing else like it is sold anywhere, he must be growing more and more nervous as the day of the winter’s baptismal ceremonies draws ever closer.

“There’s barely a month left, are you sure you can finish it?”

Come to think of it, making the flowers requires a surprisingly large amount of both time and thread, so in this extremely hectic season, unlike during the winter season where we’re shut inside by the snow and have nothing else to do, we don’t have time for making random things, or so my mother said. However, if this is a job that I’d be making money on, there might not be any problem with me devoting all of my time to it. Since I’ll need to procure the thread and talk to the granddaughter about her specific request, it’ll take somewhat more time than otherwise, but if I have until the winter baptismal ceremony, I should have more than enough time.

“Yes, sir. This hairpin isn’t for sale, but there won’t be any trouble making a new one.”

“Yeah,” says Lutz, nodding emphatically, “we can do it.”

Next to me, Benno has been grinning broadly as he listens to our conversation.

“However,” he interjects, “since I can’t register these two, when they finally finish making the hairpin, they most unfortunately won’t be able to sell it...”

“Tsk... Fine then, after we get their temporary registrations complete, let’s work out the details of the order...”

With that, Benno’s victory over the guild leader seems to have been clinched. The guild leader was unable to find serious fault with him, he didn’t reveal any information about the paper, and he was able to secure our temporary registrations. In high spirits, he turns to head out of the guild leader’s office.

“Well then, shall we go back downstairs?”

“Hold up,” says the guild leader. “I can take care of their guild cards in here, so why don’t you let the children wait here? I’d like to work out the details of the order, too.”

Benno clucks his tongue quietly, then looks back, smilingly, over his shoulder at the guild leader.

“If I left the kids here alone, I don’t even know what kind of troubles they could blunder their way into, so why don’t I stay here and make sure to keep an eye on them for you?”

“No, no, these kids seem to be very well-raised! I’m sure they won’t cause any trouble if they’re out of your sight for a minute. Right?”

Though the guild leader may be smiling kindly, I’m scared of whatever he could be scheming underneath that. Cautious of the fact that I could be suddenly stolen away, I unthinkingly grab for Benno’s hand.

“Th... this is the first time I’ve come here,” I say timidly, “so I want to

stay with Benno.”

“You see?”

Smiling triumphantly, Benno sits down on the hard bench that the guild leader has in his office, picking me up and setting me on his knee. “Good work,” he murmurs in my ear, gently ruffling my hair. He seems to be in a very good mood.

Shortly thereafter, I’m relocated to a spot on the bench next to Benno, with Lutz sitting on my other side. The guild leader sits down across from us, and we begin discussing the details of the hairpin.

“Well then,” he says, “I want one hairpin, delivered before the baptismal ceremony.”

“Umm... what color should I make the flowers? Do you know what colors she likes, or what might fit her hair, or...” “I don’t really know much about that. Just make it like that one,” he says, pointing at the pin inside my totebag.

However, that kind of blunt declaration is actually somewhat problematic for me. I am very sure that Benno is massively overcharging the guild leader for this, so I want to make sure that I’ll be producing a product that his granddaughter is going to be absolutely delighted with. I have no doubt that this grandpa, who went to great lengths to find a hairpin for his granddaughter, thinks that her smile is the most priceless thing in the world.

“Umm, could I maybe speak to your daughter directly and ask her about what she would like? I believe she’ll be much happier if I could do so.”

“I want to surprise her, so I’m trying to keep this under wraps.”

There it is! That ever-troublesome surprise gift!

In order for someone to be truly delighted by a surprise gift, the giver needs to be very certain of the recipient’s tastes and desires, and present it to them at just the right time, when they’re thinking that they want something like that. Grandpa, though, is saying that he doesn’t even know what his granddaughter’s favorite color is, which makes a surprise gift

much more challenging.

“...Umm, well, it’s important that the hairpin matches the dress she’ll be wearing, and it should fit with her hair color as well. And if she’s already found something else that she’s going to wear in her hair, then wouldn’t she be troubled by getting a new hairpin?”

“Ah, really?”

Since it’s the winter ceremony, preparations are probably already underway for the dress she’ll be wearing. If that’s the case, it’s possible that her mother is also working on something for her to wear in her hair.

“Since I’ll be making it from scratch, I feel that it’s most important that she receive something that she truly wants, even more than something that merely matches her tastes. Wouldn’t you agree that her look of joy would be more wonderful than a look of surprise?”

“Hmm, I see...”

The guild leader strokes his mustache, looking up at the ceiling as if in thought.

“Maine, was it?”

“Yes, sir.” “Would you like to come to my shop?” “She refuses!”

Before I even have a chance to react, Benno rejects the proposal.

“My shop is much bigger than Benno’s,” continues the guild leader, “and we trade in some very good things. It’s a great offer, isn’t it? You still haven’t actually had your baptismal ceremony and officially become apprentices yet, so it’s still possible for you to come apprentice at my shop. How about it?”

How about it, he says, but after all of the support I’ve received from Benno so far, I have no intentions at all to do him the injustice of spontaneously switching to another shop.

“I owe a lot to Benno that I can’t pay back,” I say. “Hmm, I’ll pay him back for you.”

“What? Ummm...”

I have every intention of refusing, but the words won't leave my mouth. As Benno watches me waver under the guild leader's relentless pressure, his mood grows worse and worse. His eyebrows crease together as he taps his temple repeatedly, looking at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Maine, kindly give your response to the guild leader. Your rejection, if you would."

"I... I mu, mu... I must refuse!" "Mm, well, that's a shame, but I guess I'll give this up for now. You've got someone scary standing over you, after all, so you can't say what you really want."

He's giving up for now?! But I'm already telling him what I really want!

"If you're going to be meeting with Freida, my granddaughter, how does tomorrow sound? It's better to get these decisions squared away sooner rather than later, isn't it?"

"Umm, couldn't Mister Benno come with me?!"

Earlier today, Benno had thoroughly engraved the words "don't meet with the guild leader alone" into my consciousness. Meeting with him without someone present who can actually handle him would be very dangerous. However, the guild leader shakes his head in reply.

"Unfortunately, both Benno and I have a meeting tomorrow. If you're just meeting with another girl your age, you don't need a stern old man like him watching over you, do you?"

"...Alright, if it's just us kids."

Caught in the middle of Benno's battle with the guild leader and focused on the plan to ask Freida about her wishes, I've started to wear down a little, so without thinking about it too much, I consented to a meeting with only another girl my age. Benno, hearing me agree with the guild leader's opinion, clucks his tongue disapprovingly.

What?! Did I do something wrong?!

I glance between Benno, whose eyebrows grow even more creased, and the guild leader, whose smile grows even wider, and suddenly realize the

stupidity of my reply. By agreeing for it to only be “us kids”, I’ve made it so that Mark won’t be able to come with me. Frantically, I kick my brain into full power, looking at both sides, trying to figure out what to do.

“S... since Lutz is going to be working on making this too, it’s alright if he comes too, right? Si... since it’s just us kids!!”

Going entirely by myself is too scary to consider. When I suggest dragging Lutz into it too, though, Benno seems to relax just a little bit.

“Well, that’s fine too,” says the guild leader. “Now then, how does meeting in the central plaza at the third bell sound? Freida can come out to meet you there.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

As if she had been waiting for the conversation to conclude, the staff member from earlier enters the room, carrying temporary membership cards. It appears that our temporary registration has been successful.

“These are your temporary membership cards. These are magic tools as well. They’re absolutely necessary when you’re conducting any sort of business discussion. Benno can explain the fine details about that later. Since this card shows that you two are essentially a shop’s apprentices, you’ll be able to use it to access the upper floors of the building.”

This mysterious card is made of a strange, pale metal that glimmers with rainbow colors as the light strikes it. Compared to the things I normally interact with, this is almost unnecessarily different. The more of the explanation I listen to, the more I admire this obviously fantastical card. Faced with the wonder of a magic tool, I can only blink in response.

“Now then, the last step is for the two of you to push some of your own blood into the card so that it can recognize you. If you do that, other people won’t be able to use it arbitrarily.”

“Wha?! B... blood?!”

Does all magic require blood? The memory of having to slice open my finger and make a blood seal for the contract magic is still very fresh in my mind.

“Give it up, Maine,” says Lutz. “Lu~uutz...”

“It’s fine, just give me your hand. ...It’s not like you’ll do it yourself, right?” “Oooohh...”

Tearfully, I extend my hand. Lutz pricks my fingertip with a needle. A drop of blood immediately wells up from the wound, to which he presses the card, which seems to absorb it.

In the next instant, it brightly flashes.

“Whoa?!”

It flashed with light for just a moment, but afterwards, it looked exactly like it had before. Not a trace of a bloodstain or a fingerprint has been left behind, leaving it as perfectly clean as it was before.

Magic tools are really convenient. But scary.

Although I had been frightened of drawing blood and startled by the card’s bright flash, Lutz finishes his own task almost disinterestedly.

“With that,” says the guild leader, “your registration is complete.”

“Thank you very much,” I reply.

I run after Benno, who has already started leaving the room now that there’s no longer any reason for him to be there, then leave the Merchant’s Guild building entirely.

All we did was get registered, but now I’m very worn out.

“Welcome back, sir. It seems you were able to successfully get these two registered?”

When we return to Benno’s shop, Mark is there waiting for us. Although from time to time I’ve seen a merchant’s dark smile cross his face, Mark is, fundamentally, a supporter, and his pleasant smile always heals me.

“Yes!” replies Benno. “Thanks to Maine, we won a flawless victory today.”

“Oh ho! How rare.” “She caught that old bastard’s eye, though.” “...That would seem to be rather dangerous indeed.”

Even Mark seems to regard the guild leader as dangerous. I must agree, from the bottom of my heart.

“Please, right this way,” he says, opening the door to Benno’s office and showing us in. “I’ve made arrangements so that we can settle the accounts regarding the prototype paper.”

“Well then,” says Benno, “let’s wrap this up then, shall we?”

As soon as I heard “settle the accounts”, though, my hand rocketed into the air.

“Excuse me! I have a question. Could you please teach me about money?”

“Huh?”

Benno frowns, not understanding what I meant, Mark, similarly, has his head tilted to the side in puzzlement.

“Ummm, well, until now, I’ve never actually held any money... I can read numbers very well, but I don’t know how the numbers and the money actually match up. ...Let’s take 5,640 leon, for instance; I don’t have any idea at all how to use coins to pay that amount, or anything like that.”

“What?!”

The wild shout of disbelief was not just Benno’s. Mark and Lutz both joined in as well.

“You...” says Benno, slowly, “haven’t touched money... Well, you’re not a merchant, and you’re such a young kid, so maybe that’s not strange? Wait, no, that still is strange, right?”

“...Oh!” says Lutz. “She never gets sent out on errands, since she faints so easily.” “Ahh...” they all say, breathing a collective sigh of understanding.

“I do calculations at the gate, but I’ve never actually watched anyone exchanging money with the merchants. When I went with Mark to go place orders, too, all we really did was hand over order forms, and we really didn’t exchange any money. I’ve been to the town market a few times with my mother, and I’ve seen her use some small coins to buy

things, but I don't know what those are or how much they're worth."

As I explain, Mark retrieves a small cloth bag, then steps forward in front of Benno. With a jingle, he spreads the contents of the bag over the desk.

"Then, perhaps I should first show you the different kinds of coins."

There are coins minted out of a light brown metal, perhaps copper, in three different sizes, and there are both small and large coins made out of silver and gold. Lutz, fixated on the gold coins on the table, gulps audibly.

"This small copper coin is worth ten leon. The mid-sized one here with the hole in the middle is one hundred leon, and the largest is one thousand. The small silver one is ten thousand, and the pattern continues through this large silver coin, and these small and large gold coins."

Since it's very easy to remember that ten of a small coin is exchanged for one of a large coin, I'm much more at ease, nodding my head in comprehension as Mark explains. To my right, however, Lutz moans quietly to himself. It seems that he is completely and utterly confused by higher orders of magnitude.

We're going to study very hard this winter.

Once he starts having money of his own, I think he'll probably learn how to calculate with it, so it'll probably be all right.

Benno takes out the six sheets of prototype paper, then lines them up on the desk.

"A full sheet of parchment is worth one small gold coin. A sheet the size we use for contracts is worth one large silver coin. A sheet about this size, then, would be about two small silver coins, I think.

A postcard-sized sheet is worth two small silver coins, he says...

I knew in theory that paper was expensive, but now that the money is being set out right next to it, I suddenly gain a new appreciation of that fact. Come to think of it, I did hear that a contract-size sheet would have been an entire month's salary for my father, didn't I?

"So, this time, let's use parchment as the basis for figuring out the price of this paper. I'll pay two small silver for the forin paper, and four small silver for the higher-quality tronbay paper. I'll take a thirty percent commission from that. Next, you said you'll be needing a new paper frame, larger than the one you used for this prototype. I'll go ahead and take the price of that out of the total now. That'll be another fifty percent."

"Alright," I reply, nodding. Since we've managed to complete our prototype, from now on the cost of any tools and materials will be entirely our responsibility. Benno smiles broadly. "How does a twenty percent share sound, this time? In the future, you'll be ordering raw materials through the lumberyard, and the market price might go down once more paper starts to circulate, so we might have to revisit this in the future, but..." "This is fine with me," I say.

I nod in agreement, then turn to look at Lutz. He nods as well, with an expression I have no idea how to read.

Benno sets a wooden calculator on the desk with a thunk and pushes it towards Lutz.

"Lutz," he says, "that's three sheets of forin paper and three sheets of tronbay. Alright?"

Lutz pushes a few things around on the calculator, inputting the price for three sheets of forin, but after that he pauses, bent finger trembling in the air, and hangs his head in defeat. He can do calculation in one digit, but when the quantities or the varieties increase, he loses all hope.

"How about you, Maine?"

"Umm, 'two times three is six and three times four is twelve', so it'll be eighteen small silver coins total. Twenty percent of that will be three small silver and six large copper for both Lutz and my share together, so each of us will get one small silver and eight large copper."

I blink a little as Benno stares at me. Behind him, Mark smiles wryly.

"That's correct. That really is amazing, to be able to compute that on the spot without a calculator."

I, however, can't even use a calculator at all, so this winter I'll need to be practicing right alongside Lutz. I need to be as familiar with my surroundings as possible.

"Next... Lutz, I'll take the cost of the slate and slate pencils out of your individual portion. That'll be two large copper coins."

Two coins are pulled from Lutz's share, and in exchange he receives a slate and a few slate pencils.

"Now, you can carry this money with you, but if you're going to have trouble finding a place to store it, you could instead deposit it at the Merchant's Guild for safekeeping. Which would you prefer?"

It seems that the Merchant's Guild also functions as some sort of bank. Having a lot of physical cash on hand is somewhat terrifying, and since one day I'd like to be able to buy a book, I'd like to have some sort of savings account.

"Please give me the large copper coins. I'll be giving them to my mother. I'll leave the silver coin with you, if you could please deposit it for me."

It had been one of my dreams as Urano to show gratitude to my parents by giving them my first real paycheck. It's okay if I manage to fulfill that dream here instead, right?

"Alright. Lutz, what about you?"

"I'll do the same as Maine." "Alright then."

I receive eight large copper coins, then Benno and I touch our guild cards together. They make a sharp pinging noise, like the plucking of a string, then we take them back. Nothing on the card seems to have changed at all.

"Now, you'll be able to take out your money on the third floor of the merchant's guild. Eventually, you're going to need to go there and practice doing that."

"That makes sense," I reply.

Benno smiles wryly at me as I stare at the card in my hands, spinning it

around in my fingers. Mark seems to share similar thoughts. Lutz touches his card to Benno's as well, then collects six coins. The feel of the cold metal in our hands sets our hearts racing.

"This... is the first time I've ever held money," I whisper. "We've earned this ourselves, you know?"

I think back on all of the many failures we faced before we successfully made paper. Seeing this money after all of that is moving me deeply.

"When spring comes, let's make a lot of paper, and let's sell it all," I say. "Yeah!" replies Lutz.

My mind still fixated on my first ever earnings and feeling completely satisfied with the afternoon's events, I look up at Benno.

"This is everything we needed to do today, right?" I ask.

However, my words only cause Benno to grimace, and he flicks me on the forehead.

"Hey, don't be stupid, kid. Your battle is tomorrow. You're going to be facing off against that old bastard's granddaughter, alone, with no adults there, you know? With that thoughtless look on your face?!"

"What?! But, um, she's just a child, and we're both girls, right?"

I can't imagine this being anything you'd call a battle. All I'm going to do is meet Freida so that I can ask her what she wants, and the guild leader isn't going to be there, so is "facing off" really the right phrase to use?

"According to the rumors, it sounds like the granddaughter that old bastard really dotes on is the one kid amongst all his grandkids who's the most like him."

"Sh... she takes after the guild leader?"

I try to imagine what the guild leader's face would look like on a young girl, but my imagination fails me.

"Well, you're bringing Lutz with you, so that's a little better. You won't get overwhelmed. Lutz, you shouldn't say anything you don't need to, but if that girl tries to steal Maine like the guild leader did earlier today, you

need to immediately refuse. Personally, I have no idea where that old bastard's hidden his traps. Got that?"

"Got it."

Lutz nods vigorously, an earnestly serious expression on his face. Is it really necessary to make this big of a deal out of this meeting, though? We're talking about an unbaptized little girl, right?

As I lean my head to one side doubtfully, the coins audibly rub together in my hand.

"...Come to think of it," I say, "how much did you agree on for Freida's hairpin? The guild leader made some sort of sign with his fingers, but I didn't know how to read it..."

"The sign that old man put up meant three small silver coins. When I said we needed to ask for a little more, that made it four coins."

This is extremely startling to hear. Even factoring in the price of the thread, this is massively overcharging for just a single hairpin.

"Th... what? What?! That's a ripoff!"

"Make sure you're done on time. This winter's baptismal ceremony is going to be a great advertisement, so that'll affect how well we can sell them afterward." "Um, so, adjusting the price is..."

With a sharp glare, Benno banishes my last glimmer of hope.

"You think I'm pulling one over on that geezer?"

"No, not at all."

I hang my head dejectedly as I reply. I'm going to have to make a pin that's worth four small silver coins, so there's more than just a little bit of pressure on me.

"Even after my introduction fee, my commission, and the materials cost, you're still going to make, what, fifty, sixty percent of that? Put your heart into this, kids. It'll be fine! Look, that old bastard finally managed to find the hairpin he was looking so hard for, but you wouldn't sell the one you were holding right in front of him. That makes it seem even harder to get,

right? Then, he's asking that you do something that you'd ordinarily be doing as your winter handiwork right now, in the middle of this amazingly busy time of year when everyone's trying to prepare for winter, and sell it to him by this winter's baptismal ceremony, before it's even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is? That's what that price means. Don't worry about it, kid."

Chapter 39: The Guild Leader's Granddaughter

“What do we do, Lutz?”

“She’s going to wave to us when she gets here, probably?” “...I wonder if she’ll recognize us?” “She will. Your hairpin is super unique, and plus her grandfather is right in there so if she goes to ask him, she’ll be able to pick us out right away, right?”

Lutz, shrugging, points to the Merchant’s Guild building that overlooks the central plaza. As he says, Freida could probably identify us immediately.

“Hey, Lutz. How did it go at your place yesterday? My folks were...”

Yesterday, Lutz and I sold our paper to Benno, then returned home with our first earnings. At my house, my entire family’s eyes all went wide upon seeing the money, and when I told them the story about how Lutz and I had worked to make paper, they praised me, saying things like “amazing!” and “you must have worked hard!”. Then, after I added my first-ever pay to our living budget, we bought a fair amount of a precious luxury item during the winter preparation days: honey.

“How about you, Lutz? Are they happier with you becoming a trader now?”

Lutz, working with me, successfully finished our-making project, and was accepted by Benno to be an apprentice at his shop. What, though, would his family think, I wonder? Would they approve of his enthusiasm?

Lutz shrugs, smiling bitterly. “It went... questionably. They were overjoyed about the money, but they’re still not sold on the idea of me being a merchant. My dad was all, ‘you said you made paper with Maine and sold it, so why not be a craftsman and make paper?’ He’d said he’d be happier if I was just a craftsman.”

“Your dad really wants you to be a craftsman, huh.”

I understand how someone can take great pride in making things for a living, but Lutz's dreams are very different. It's hard to find a middle ground.

"But I don't want to be a craftsman. I want to be a merchant like Benno, able to leave the city. Maine, you didn't just want to make paper, right?"

"Right. My next step is to figure out how to mass-produce it. Then, I want hand off the actual production duties to someone else and work towards making books. If there aren't more books in the world, I can't own a bookstore, and my dream of being a librarian is always going to be a dream."

If I want books to proliferate, then just mass-producing paper isn't going to be enough. A printing technique is also absolutely necessary. I can't let myself be satisfied with books made out of loose stacks of memo paper.

...The road ahead is still very long.

"If I could run a bookstore with you, Maine, that would be great! Yesterday, when I saw those bookshelves at the Merchant's Guild, I started thinking, who's going to want books? People who can read, so rich people, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

The commoners in this town can't really read, so of course there's no way they're going to want to buy books. 'Books? What're those? They tasty?' they'd say.

"So, if we're selling books, then we're going to want to go and sell them to the nobility of a lot of different towns, right? Like maybe the lord of the next town over, like we saw on the map."

When I consider the types of customers that might be buying books, he's making a fair amount of sense.

As I idly admire Lutz for how he solidified his own goals while silently staring at that map, I hear the patter of small footsteps coming up to me and stopping.

“Pardon me, but are you Maine?”

“Um?! Uh, yes!! I’m Maine. You must be Freida?” “That’s right!” she says, beaming. “Pleased to meet you.”

Her cherry-blossom hair is done up in pigtails, and her light brown eyes show a hint of a gentle smile; a sweet and adorable little girl. I don’t know if it’s because of good breeding or very rigorous home discipline, but her actions and manner of speech are more grown-up than I was expecting, in contrast to how small she is for her age. I can’t say much about the person herself, but she gives off an unbalanced first impression.

However, no matter how hard I look, I can’t see a trace of the guild leader in her. Maybe it was just a rumor that she resembles her grandfather the guild master? I’m glad Benno was worried for nothing.

She looks over at Lutz. “Are you Maine’s friend? I was looking forward to it just being us girls...” Her cheeks puff out in just a hint of a pout.

Certainly, talking with another girl my age does have some appeal, but that’s usually restricted to only when the other girl is a close friend. Today, our destination is the guild leader’s house. I have no desire at all to go there by myself.

In response, I immediately grab on to Lutz’s hand, smiling at him.

“I’m not really strong, and I faint a lot, so if I don’t have Lutz here with me I can’t really go outside. Even if I go to Mister Benno’s shop, if Lutz doesn’t come with me, they won’t let me in. So, if Lutz can’t come today...”

Before I can get the words ‘I’ll have to go home’ out of my mouth, Frieda suddenly bursts into a question.

“It’s dangerous if nobody’s watching you, and you faint a lot... Maine, do you perhaps have... the devouring?”

“Huh? ...Devouring?”

Unconsciously, I tip my head to the side, hearing this unfamiliar term. Frieda has her head tilted in the opposite direction, her hands held lightly to her cheeks.

“Do you not know the word? ...How do I say this, is there something hot deep inside you that moves around against your will?”

“There is!! That sickness, do you know about it?!”

Information about this disease, which nobody so far has known anything about, has suddenly appeared from a completely unexpected source. Both Lutz and I lean forward eagerly, waiting for her reply, but she gives a slightly troubled smile.

“...I had it as well. That’s why my body is still so small, you see?”

It seems like both my small stature and the fact that I collapse if I lose focus even slightly are caused by this “devouring” illness. When I compare myself to Freida, who also looks like she could be two or three years younger than she really is, I’m suddenly taken aback.

“Is... is there a cure?!”

She just used the past tense. In other words. She’s cured. After I briefly exchanged a glance with Lutz, the question leapt hungrily out of my mouth. Freida lowers her eyebrows apologetically and answers in a low, sighing voice.

“...It’s expensive. Really expensive.”

“Whoa, it’s hopeless, then...”

For the granddaughter of a successful merchant who serves as the leader of a guild to say something is “really expensive”, then there isn’t the slightest hope that my family will be able to purchase it. I hang my head low, dejectedly, and Freida pats me gently on the shoulder.

“But you seem so healthy, Maine! As long as you keep your eye set on a goal and work towards it with all your might, you’ll be fine. Be careful, though, because if your will falters or you lose sight of your goal, then you’ll face the backlash.”

I see. It’s because I had my mind set first on going to the forest, and then now on making paper, that I’ve been so healthy lately? When I gave up on my last objective I did come close to death, huh.

Huh? Isn't this like those migratory fish that literally die if they stop swimming?

I groan quietly to myself as I carefully file this new information away inside my head. My sickness is called the devouring. Today, I finally learned its name. Also, I learned a method to manage it. In order to stay healthy, I need to be constantly moving towards a goal.

"If you have no more questions, shall we head to my house?"

"Sure," I reply.

The house that Freida leads us to has a shop on its ground floor, much like others in the area. It's considerably large, and far closer to the castle walls than Benno's is. In fact, it might not even be accurate to describe the building as "close" to the walls. It is right next to them, and has the best view of the temple that one could possibly get.

"I really love watching the parade to the baptismal ceremonies, you know, and I watch them every single time. During this summer's parade, I saw that hairpin. It stood out so much for me."

If her house is here, then she'd be able to have an excellent view of the entire procession as it enters the temple without even having to leave her front door.

"Since it was the first time I'd seen anything like it, I asked my grandfather if he had any information about it, but he wasn't able to find anything out about it. Then, in the fall ceremony, when I saw that they hadn't spread around, I thought it was very mysterious..."

"These do require some time to make," I say, "so unfortunately I really can't make them unless it's the middle of the winter, when I have a lot of time on my hands."

Or so my mother insists, I add, in my head.

"Is that what happened..."

"If I can sell them, then you should be able to see many girls wearing ornaments like these come next spring's ceremonies." "Well! So, that

means that I'll be the only girl wearing one this winter, right? I'm looking forward to this!"

When I see her face light up, I remember how Benno had said "sell it as a special service by the winter's baptismal ceremony, before it's even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is." I see now that this would be like a special premium product.

It may be premium, but still, is it okay to rip them off like this? I'd really prefer not...

The building that Freida's home and her grandfather's shop is in seems to have been rented out entirely to the store's employees. Not a single person who doesn't have any connection to the store lives in this building, it seems.

When we reach her home, on the second floor of the building, I suddenly stop dead in my tracks, stunned.

There's so much cloth in this room. I thought the same thing when I had visited Otto's house before, but that was only when I was in his parlor. However, no matter where I look in Freida's house, I see tapestries and cushions in a brilliant display of overflowing color. Also, on the shelves, there are stone figures of animals and metal sculptures. It is very obvious that this is the home of an exceptionally rich family, one with the political clout to live so close to the nobility.

"Refreshments, young lady?"

After being brought to the drawing room, the woman working as a servant here brings something to drink. This red liquid is served not in the wooden cups I'm used to seeing, but in metal ones.

"Ah, thank you," Freida replies. "This," she says to me, "is a beverage made by adding water to a syrup made by adding water to colde juice. It is very sweet!"

Colde berries are very much like raspberries, so I perhaps this is something like raspberry juice. As I ponder, I raise the cup to my lips, and find that it's much sweeter than I expected. It's so rare for me to taste

sweet things, and I belatedly realize that my careful expression has disintegrated into a genuine smile.

“So sweet! Lutz, this is delicious!”

“It really is! Sweet and tasty!” “I’m so glad you enjoy it! ...Now then, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Freida tilts her head very slightly to the side as she asks her question, and I wonder just what the guild leader actually told her. Since I have no way to actually tell, perhaps giving her a full explanation myself would be the best idea?

“To be frank, yesterday, your grandfather commissioned me to make you a hair ornament that you could wear to your baptismal ceremony.”

I take Tory’s hairpin, which I’d brought as an example, from my tote bag. Freida glances at it, then nods slightly.

“That much I had heard. However, I’d have expected my grandfather to just arbitrarily decide on something like that without any input, though.”

As expected of a grandchild. She is absolutely correct. Her grandfather had been running wild and ordered this hairpin entirely on his own, intending for it to be a total surprise.

“Ummm... he did say something to that extent, but I personally thought that you’d be far happier with a hairpin that was not only your favorite color but also matched your clothing as well, so I asked him if I could meet with you to discuss what you would truly want.”

Freida’s hair is the color of cherry blossoms. In other words, it’s a light pink. A hair ornament that was made to match Tory’s blue-green hair would absolutely not fit her hair color. An image starts to form in my mind; perhaps reddish flowers, or maybe even white ones, set in contrast to green leaves to pull everything together.

“Ah, I thought that was a little too unusually thoughtful for my grandfather, but it seems you were the one who reined him in?”

“Anyhow, if it’s alright with you, could you please show me the clothing

that you're going to wear to the ceremony? I'd like to look at the colors that were used in the embroidery."

I had intended to dodge that particular topic and turn the conversation away from the subject of the guild leader, but Freida, perceiving this, chuckles softly to herself.

...Are all the children who have had such high-class training so mature?

Both her actions and her manner of speaking are maybe even more adult than mine. At the very least, she's a very different person from the other kids that I go to the forest with.

"Wait just a minute," she says. "I'll go get my dress for you."

As Freida leaves her seat, Lutz lets out an unnecessarily overexaggerated sigh. He rolls his shoulders and shakes his head from side to side, limbering up his body as if staring silently had been a tremendously difficult task.

"Are you doing okay, Lutz?"

"I couldn't really join in the conversation. I dunno anything about how clothes and colors match up, and I can't really make myself talk that fancy, you know."

When Freida and I were talking, I'd unintentionally started talking in a much more polite manner. Since I had also been very concerned about accidentally saying something out of place, I nod emphatically in agreement.

"Yeah. When you start working, you're going to need to know how to talk fancy like that, but you can let me do that talking today when we're asking her what she wants. Staying totally silent like that is probably really hard, but I'd be very worried if I didn't have you here, so please stay with me!"

"Yeah!"

Just having a friend nearby is reassuring. Just as I breathe out sigh of relief, Freida returns.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting. This is the dress I’ll be wearing.”

“Whoa, amazing!”

Freida has brought out the dress that she’s planning on wearing to her baptismal ceremony. Like Tory’s, white serves as the foundation for the garment, but unlike Tory’s, the material is far thicker. To be specific, Freida’s dress has parts of it that are fluffy, like fur, and it looks very warm.

Suddenly reminded of the countless, countless layers I have to wear during the winter, puffing me up like a ball, I groan quietly to myself. During the summer ceremonies, everyone wears thin fabrics, so what’s important isn’t just the money you have to spend, but also the skill with which the garment is put together. For the winter ceremonies, though, one’s purchasing power makes a much bigger difference, it seems.

“Freida, do you like this color?”

“I do. That’s why I had my dress embroidered in it, you know?”

Having discovered embroidery done in a reddish thread amongst the white of her dress, I compare it to the color of her hair. If I use this color, I should be able to match both her dress and her hair.

“Do you by any chance have any of this embroidery thread left over?” I ask. “I do, I think; what do you need it for?”

“I think that, for consistency’s sake, I should make the flowers the same color. May I ask you for a little bit of it? I can try to find a thread that’s the same color.” “Sure, that’s fine with me.”

I’ll get a small piece of thread from her, then ask Benno to find me more thread that matches that color. Since Benno has already negotiated a ludicrously high price, I think I can afford to be picky about the thread being used.

“Will this be enough, I wonder?”

Freida returns with a ball of thread so large that she could probably have her dress fully embroidered a second time.

“That’s... certainly enough, but...”

“Then, I’ll leave it in your capable hands.”

She places the bundle of deep red thread in my arms, leaving me at a loss for words.

If she’s giving me all of the raw materials, then we’re really overcharging her! What should I do now?!

Although, I can’t really say anything like “since the price Benno quoted included sourcing the raw materials, I’ll give you a discount.” The relationship between Benno and the guild leader he’s overcharging is complicated enough, which is troubling. Plus, in my head, I can hear him admonishing me, saying “whenever and wherever you can take money, just take it, it’s something to be taken.”

Groaning softly to myself, I take another look at Freida’s hairstyle.

“How were you planning on styling your hair on the day of the ceremony?” I ask. “Just like it is now, I think...?”

Since Freida has her hair in pigtails, she’ll need two hairpins. I’m glad I thought to ask. Better yet, I’m glad I stopped the guild leader from being too rash. If I’d done as he’d asked, not only would the hairpin not suit her, but she’d only have a pin for one side of her hair, which would have been problematic indeed.

“...If you’ll be wearing it like you are today, you’ll need two hairpins, won’t you?”

“...Ah. You’re right.”

Freida seems just as taken aback as I am. I’m slightly relieved though; if I have to make two hairpins, then this will be somewhat less of a huge rip-off. Freida thoughtfully taps on her chin, a slightly serious expression on her face.

“I’m going to have to pay double for this, I think.”

“No, no, since you’ve given me the thread I’ll need for the materials, the existing payment is very much fine with me.”

Since the production cost has been driven down to basically nothing, there is literally no way I could possibly accept double the excessive amount that we're already charging. The thought of it hurts my stomach.

"No, but you can't possibly say that," she replies. "You agreed to make one hairpin for that amount of money. If you make two, then I'll pay you for two."

"I couldn't! You're providing the raw materials, so for two..."

As Freida and I start to endlessly dither back and forth, with her insisting she'll pay and me insisting she doesn't have to, Lutz, who has been quiet this whole time, suddenly reaches up to noisily scratch his head.

"So," he proposes, "how about charging half-price for the second one?"

"Huh?" "Maine, since you got the materials, you want to give a discount. Freida, since you don't want to cause any trouble between Benno and the guild leader, you want to pay full price for two. How about you meet in the middle, and pay half?" "Lutz, you're a genius!" I exclaim. "Freida, how does that sound?"

I jump on Lutz's proposed compromise, to which I can't find any objections. I eagerly turn to look at Freida, but her incomprehensible expression doesn't seem to tell me that she's satisfied with that.

"I'm... fine with that, I guess, but... whenever and wherever you can earn money, you should take it, right? It's something that's there to be taken."

This girl has just spouted words that do not at all match her sweet and adorable appearance. Freida is, without a doubt, a merchant's daughter, and the grandchild of the guild leader.

"...Is that a merchant's wisdom?" I ask. "Benno said the same thing..."

"Hm?" she says, looking slightly doubtful. "Isn't that just how commerce works?"

Although she talks as if she's saying the most obvious thing in the world, I can't help but shake my head.

"There are limits to that, like, there are fair prices for things, and... ah,

well, I'm just happy we found a compromise."

"The two are pretty unusual!" she says, smiling slightly. This, however, is no hidden sneer, but a friendly, genuine smile.

We certainly haven't formed a bond through resolving this disagreement, but I think we've worked a little bit to clear the space between us. It feels like there's a little bit of solidarity, here.

This wasn't exactly a negotiation to be proud of, but all of the details of the hairpins have been worked out. I'd thought that we'd immediately head home after that, but by now refills for our colde juice have arrived, and Lutz's eyes, which had been full of silent desire to immediately leave, are now firmly glued to his cup. I myself also want to stay a little while long and savor this sweet flavor, so we spend a bit of time chatting idly.

"Ah, so you go to the forest to pick fruits and gather firewood. That sounds like you're going on a picnic every day!"

Gathering firewood is pretty essential to maintaining our lifestyles, so it's actually not as leisurely of an activity as she's making it out to be. Rather, I'm actually more interested in how Freida lives, since she has no need to go out to the forest in order to forage for firewood.

"Freida, what do you usually do during the day? Kids in this part of the town don't go to the forest, do they?"

"Oh, what I like to do is... heh heh..."

In a single beat, Freida starts smiling broadly.

"Counting money, I'd say?"

Huh? Did I mishear? Was that my imagination? Did my ears go funny for a second? I can't imagine that a thought like that would have come out of this sweet, adorable little girl's mouth.

"Ah, that's not quite right. My apologies."

I'm taken aback by that unexpectedly strange answer, but Freida gently shakes her head and moves to revise her earlier statement. She just misspoke, it seems, I think to myself, putting a relieved hand on my chest.

But only for a moment.

“It’s not just counting it, I like saving it. Feeling the heavy weight of a sack full of gold is so delightful, and hearing coins clink against each other is the most wonderful thing! Don’t you agree?”

“...Ah... yes... that might be right. I also like it when my savings box starts to get heavy.”

After squeezing those words out, I quietly close my eyes.

...That wasn’t a hallucination. Now who’s making stuff up about her hobbies? Me! I am! I’m an enormous idiot! She’s the kind of girl who looks like she should be into making candy or embroidering things, so for her hobby to be money... I hadn’t even the slightest clue.

“Ah! You know what I mean?!”

Perhaps because someone agreed with her opinion, or perhaps because she just loves money that much, she starts getting fired up.

“So, when I was very young, the thing I loved the most was the glittering of gold coins, so when my grandfather did his monthly accounting, I sat with him, and I really enjoyed helping him count his gold.”

Did she just skip entirely over copper and silver, and go straight to gold? This damn rich girl!

Even as I grow increasingly envious, Freida keeps passionately rambling on. She gets entranced by gold, she says excitedly, to the point that her eyes grow foggy and her cheeks grow hot, etc., etc., and she thinks that financial calculations and growing a business looks very fun.

“And, lately, I’ve been thinking about what I can do to start making more money, so when I find new products that I might be able to sell my heart starts jumping with joy!”

...What do I do? This girl is strange. She’s cute, but far too unfortunate.

“Hey, Maine.”

“Y-yes, what is it?”

By this point, about half of my consciousness has wandered entirely elsewhere, so when she addresses I suddenly sit straight back up, snapping back to attention. Freida's eyes are glittering brightly, and at the same time she grabs my hands tightly.

"I'm really pleased with you, you know."

"Thank you very much?"

My voice unconsciously pitches unnaturally up at the end of my statement. I have no clue whatsoever about why she could possibly be pleased with me. As I tilt my head doubtfully to the side, Freida draws unabashedly close, a blush crossing her adorably sweet face as she continues to speak.

"Maine, do you want to work with me?"

"She can't!" replies Lutz immediately, before I can even react.

"Oh my! Well, my family's shop is much larger than Benno's, and we've been selling things for a lot longer than he has, so this is a good deal for her, isn't it? So, since there's no way you're officially employed as apprentices since you still haven't been baptized yet, so she can still come do her apprenticeship at my family's shop! Also, I'm asking Maine. That question wasn't directed at you at all."

Huh? Didn't something like this happen... yesterday...?

"I'm thankful for the offer," I say, "but I owe a lot to Mister Benno..."

Before I can finish my sentence with "so I must refuse", Freida suddenly smiles even more widely, interrupting me.

"Aha! If that's the case, then I'll pay him back for you."

"Um?! W, well..."

I'm trying to refuse, but she's not letting me. Those weren't just rumors. Benno wasn't just overexaggerating his fears.

She is exactly like the guild leader! Her manner of speaking might be a little different, but she is saying the exact same things!

Her smile not fading in the slightest, she starts rambling off all of the benefits of working at her family's shop. Lutz is suddenly looking very unhappy.

"Maine, answer her clearly, like you did yesterday."

"I, I, I must refuse!!"

Ordinarily, I'd think that being rejected so clearly would cause a child to start crying, but Freida's eyes merely go wide for a brief moment. Then, her fighting spirit reignites, and her eyes gleam brightly again.

"Well then, that's a shame. ...But! There's still some time before your baptismal ceremony, Maine, and since you're temporarily registered with the Merchant's Guild already, I'm sure there will be plenty of opportunities for me to run into you until then. Heh heh heh, I'm looking forward to this!"

What now? I feel like I'm a rat cornered by a snake, with no place to escape, and a cold sweat breaks out over my forehead.

Chapter 40: Freida's Hairpins

Lutz and I leave Freida's house, commencing our journey home. She just saw us off with a smile, but why do I feel like I'm fleeing for my life? All we did was eat sweets and chat a little, but why am I more exhausted than when I go to the forest?

As we pass Benno's shop on our way home, Mark calls out to us. We'd previously been told that we should come by the shop tomorrow afternoon to deliver our report, so we were planning on heading home for the day, but Mark waves to us, smilingly beckoning us inside.

"I know that we had planned to discuss this tomorrow," he says, "but since Master Benno is rather nervous at the moment, would you perhaps be willing to discuss the outcome of today's negotiations right now?"

"...Yes, I would."

My stomach churns a little as I think about how much I might get scolded for arbitrarily charging half price for a second pin, but I do really want to finish this as quickly as possible.

"Master Benno," says Mark, opening the door. "May Maine and Lutz enter?"

"Yeah, show them in."

Benno sits behind his desk, tapping his finger impatiently on its surface as if to tell us to get in there immediately.

"...Maine, what'd you think? Of that old man's granddaughter."

"Ummm, she seemed like very cute young lady, like the rumors said."
"Alright, so she's well-groomed. What did you think?"

I tried hard to be politely indirect about my description, but Benno waves his hand dismissively, telling me to get to the heart of the matter.

"To be honest," I reply, "her appearance and her personality are so different that I was a little shocked. She's not just a girl who loves money, though; she's been close to the guild leader, observing him, since well

before her baptism. She's thinking about how to grow her capital, how to expand her business ventures, and so on. I think she has amazing talent for being a merchant."

"You think she's amazing, hmm..."

Benno roughly scratches his head, then breathes a heavy sigh.

"Umm," I say, "how should I put this... she's cute, but very... strange. Right, Lutz?"

When I cram all those thoughts about my impression of her into that one sentence, Lutz raises his eyebrows, then looks down at me with a face that screams "like you're one to talk." Benno, looking very interested, quirks up the edges of his mouth, then asks Lutz the same question.

"Lutz, what did you think?"

"She tried to recruit Maine just like the guild leader did yesterday, so I think that she's not someone you can let your guard down around. Also, I think that... she's kinda like Maine." "Whaaat?! How?!"

That's way too unthinkable!

As I practically lunge forward, demanding an explanation for his shocking words, Lutz merely shrugs his shoulders.

"When that girl talked about money," he says, "she looked like you do when you're talking about books. Both of you act like you don't have eyes for anything other than the thing you like, so it's just like you said earlier: cute face, but weird inside."

Ah, I see. Right now, apparently, I look pretty cute.

There are no mirrors in my house, so I had tried to look at my reflection in a bucket of water, but all I could see was a warped, blurry shadow. The only people who have called me cute to my face were either people I've only just met or my excessively doting father, so I thought it was just polite flattery.

For as long as I can remember, I've been used to people calling me not just your average bookworm, but a weirdo. It doesn't really matter much to

me, but I wasn't particularly cute at all. If you had looked at me, you'd have seen just the kind of nerdy girl who holed herself up in the library all the time. Nobody had ever said that I looked any different than they thought I should.

I imagine a girl who resembles her siblings, so one who looks like a younger version of Tory, who also chases after nonexistent books, so an eccentric, strangely-behaving one. As I think about that dramatic clash of images, I hang my head in defeat.

"...I'm sorry. I have something to think about now."

"Think long and hard about it." "Ngh..." I say, depressed.

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with a smirk, starts tapping his finger on his desk again.

"Then what? Did you finish your negotiations?"

"Umm, Miss Freida wears her hair in two braids, so it turns out that I'll be making two hairpins." "Hmm! So we'll make double the profit."

My heart skips a beat when he says that. There's no way I can't tell him about this, but if I tell him, he'll absolutely get mad at me.

"Well, umm, you see..."

"What?"

Benno stares pointedly at me with his reddish-brown eyes. My breath catches in my throat with a squeak, and I stammer, stalling for time, as I try to come up with some kind of explanations. Benno turns his sharp gaze from me to Lutz. The instant Benno opens his mouth, Lutz starts talking.

"Miss Freida provided Maine with the thread that she'll be using for the raw materials, so Maine said that she'd make the second one for no extra charge..."

"Lutz?!" I cry, panicked. "What did you say?!" roars Benno, at the exact same instant. "Miss Freida," continued Lutz, "insisted that the price had already been established, so she'd pay full price for the second one..." "...

Oh?” “It didn’t seem like they’d ever agree on anything, so I spoke up, and we came to an agreement that Miss Freida would pay half price for the second hairpin.”

After Lutz delivers his precise, succinct report, Benno raises his eyebrows, then turns to look at me.

“Maine... are you an idiot? Have you heard a word I’ve said? Or did you just forget everything?”

“I... I remembered! So even when I got the materials, I didn’t try to lower the price at all for the first one. But then, after we agreed on half-price for the second, Freida said ‘whenever and wherever you can take money you should take it, because it’s something that’s there to be taken’, like you do.” “The person you were negotiating with told you that?”

Benno rubs his forehead, an amazed look on his face, then shakes his head. Even I had thought it was kind of pitiful that my opponent would remind me of that, but the thought of overcharging her that much made my stomach churn.

“But I was thinking that maybe there’s a limit to how much I should be profiting, or maybe I was way past asking for a fair price, so my stomach started hurting... please forgive me.”

“What kind of merchant gets a stomachache when earning money? Seriously... Well, that’s just money out of your pocket. I’m charging the same handling fee for both of them, so I don’t care either way. If strange rumors start to spread about how you can get a second hairpin for free if you buy one, then you’re definitely going to get pushy customers coming in to demand it. Make sure you pay attention to what customers you can afford to lose.”

I hadn’t realized that customers like that could possibly exist. I hang my head even lower, the awareness of my lack of basic knowledge being hammered like nails into my skull.

“Ngh, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I’m sorry. Then, here is the thread that Freida lent me to use as materials. I’m going to want some white thread that matches this one. I’m going to need, ummm...”

I pull the measuring tape out of my tote bag, then stretch it from fingertip to fingertip.

“About this long... I’ll need a piece that’s about 100 feli long, please.”

“Got it. Tomorrow, come back here so that you can go to the thread warehouse with Mark. While you’re at it, you should pick up the thread you’ll need for your winter work.” “Yes, sir,” I reply.

After we’re told that it’s okay to leave, Lutz and I head out from Benno’s shop to return home. I suddenly sympathize dearly with all of the worn-out salarymen back home. I want to go home and be comforted.

“I’m home,” I say, as I walk through the door. “Welcome back, Maine,” says Tory. “How was the girl you met today? Did you make friends?”

She, on cooking duty for today, looks up from the pot she’s stirring and smiles at me. She has a cute face, she’s very helpful, she’s kind, she’s been getting better at cooking so she’s a (future) excellent cook, and since she’s working as a seamstress she’s a (future) sewing beauty. When I see her, emotion suddenly wells up in my heart.

“Toryyy~!” I cry, running up and clinging to her tightly.

She looks down at me, frowning a little. “What’s wrong, Maine, did something happen?”

“Tory, you’re an angel! You heal me. You’re the best older sister in the world, but I’m not even just sick and useless all the time. Lutz told me today that I’m way weirder than I look, so I only just noticed. I’m so sorry, Tory!” “Hah...” she sighs, stroking my head. “You just noticed?”

After a little while, she points over to the bedroom. “Maine, I can’t cook like this. Go put your stuff away, okay?”

“Okay!”

I put my tote bag away, then come back to help Tory in the kitchen. Even though people keep saying over and over that I’m so small, I have grown a little bit, so now I can actually stir a pot safely, if I’m standing on a chair.

While I carefully stir the pot so that nothing burns, I tell Tory all about

my day.

“Okay, so, the girl I met is called Freida, and she’s really cute, but her hobby is money. She said her favorite thing to do is count gold coins.”

“Gold coins?! I haven’t even seen those! She must be super rich to have enough of those to count.”

Tory seems to have jumped straight to the quantity of gold coins, missing Freida’s weird interests entirely. Around here, I think it might not be uncommon for someone to spend their entire life without seeing a single gold coin, so I know just how big of an impact that might have.

“Her house is amazing too. There’s decorations and cloth everywhere, and it’s very pretty. Oh! And then Freida told me that the sickness I have is called the devouring.”

“...Huh, I’ve never heard of that.”

Tory tilts her head to the side doubtfully when she hears about that previously-unknown disease. It can’t be helped; it seems like there’s very few people who actually know about it, after all.

“It’s a really rare disease. Mister Otto and Mister Benno even said that they didn’t know about it. She knew about it because she used to have it too! But she also said that it took a lot of money to cure her. And if a girl that rich says that it took a lot of money...”

“...then there’s no way we can afford it.”

Tory immediately comes to the same conclusion that I had. She didn’t even need to think about it. With our economic status, where we can’t even call a doctor when someone collapses with a fever, there’s no way we can make that happen, no matter what we do.

“...Yeah. But she told me about what I can do to make sure it doesn’t get any worse!”

“Oh?” “If I have a goal or a target in mind, and I’m always working really hard on making it there, then I’ll be fine, she says.” “Ah! That makes sense. You’ve been kinda doing whatever you like lately, so you’ve been

much healthier. Before, you always used to cry about how only I could do things that I liked..." "Ooh..."

Now that she mentions it, Maine's memories are full of times when she was feverish, crying a lot, and bothering Tory. Now that she's made that comparison to the past out loud, though, I think she had to have noticed something strange had happened, right?

As I start to brood, Tory hurriedly comes over to stroke my hair comfortingly.

"Don't feel bad. I think it's great that you're feeling so much better. So! How about the hairpin?"

"I asked her about what her favorite color was, and she gave me some of the thread that her dress is embroidered with. I'm going make the pins out of it. And since she has her hair in two braids, she needs two pins." "Hmm, I see!"

Our mother returns home while we're still in the middle of our preparations, and after a little while our father, who has recently been stuck only on night shifts and thus I haven't seen very much, returns from his first day shift in a while. While we eat the first dinner in a while that we've had the whole family together for, we talk a lot about the guild leader's home. It's not at all common for someone like us to be able to visit the home of someone so rich, so everyone at the table was extremely interested in hearing all about it.

My mother seemed most interested in hearing about all of the decorative tapestries and cushions they had, and my father was more interested in the brands of liquor they had lined up on the shelves. Tory was curious about the things that Freida wore and the kinds of things she owned, so her questions were all about Freida's belongings.

After a much more exciting dinner than I thought we'd have, I pull my mother aside and ask her if she could give back my embroidery needles.

"What are you going to do?" she asks. "I'm going to make some hairpins. I told you yesterday, right? They're what Freida wants me to make. Today I went to find out exactly what she wanted to order. I also told her that I

wanted to make it out of the same thread that her dress was embroidered with, so she lent me some.”

“Could you show me that thread, please?”

My mother, the skilled seamstress who works as a dyer, could not, of course, hide her great interest in the thread I’d brought home from Freida. She tells me that she’ll get her sewing kit and take out the embroidery needles, so I should immediately go and fetch the thread.

I pull the thread out of my tote bag. The instant I set it on the table, my mother picks it up, staring at it very closely. Tory, who is apprenticing as a seamstress, is also interested in the kind of thread that the daughter of a rich family has embroidered on her dresses, so she excitedly comes in to sneak a peek.

“Dying a thread this deeply red takes a lot of work, you know.”

“It really is a high quality thread!”

While the two of them are entranced by the bundle of thread they hold, I sit down at the table in front of them and get my embroidering needles ready.

“Since hairpins like this are super rare, we’re going to sell it at a really high price. So, I’m going to try my hardest on this!”

“Is it going to be like mine?” asks Tory.

When I was making Tory’s pin, my first priority had been making economical use of the thread we had, so I was only really able to make it out of tiny flowers made out of the colors of thread we had left over. This time, though, I have quite a lot of the red thread that Freida lent me. Also, since we’re charging as much as we are, I’m going to try to make it somewhat more elaborate than Tory’s. For me, I need to put in a good faith effort.

“The flowers are going to be bigger,” I say. “since I’ve got so much more thread.”

My mental image is a bouquet, with a ring of miniature red roses set

against green grasses. If I'm talking about a rich girl, the only thing my terrible imagination can come up with is, regrettably, roses. Roses, however, are very gorgeous flowers, and it'll be a very showy piece.

I knit together a jagged strip of lace, designed so that it'll form into petals once it's rolled up. When I decided it was long enough, I roll it up, stitch it shut along the bottom, then spread the petals out a little bit, turning it into a small rose.

"Whoa, cute!"

Happy because Tory praised me, I immediately get started on the second flower. My dad, drinking some liquor, looks over to see what's happening, then turns to my mother, who's been watching me this whole time and acting like she's itching to jump in.

"Say, Eva. If you're so interested in doing that, would you like me to make you another set of needles?"

"Dad," says Tory, "I want some too, so make two sets please!"

Emboldened by my mother's grateful embrace and Tory's begging, my father, in high spirits, gets some wood and starts whittling. Since he's already made a set of these for me, it takes him a relatively short amount of time to craft each slender needle.

Tory grabs the first completed set, then starts knitting along with me. Since she's been going to apprentice as a seamstress, it seems like her skills have been leveling up; after thinking about it for a few moments, she starts knitting fluidly. To be honest, she's faster than I am.

My mother has been hungrily watching me work, so when she receives her freshly-made needles she smiles brilliantly at my father, then tears into the work with a fierceness I never thought was possible.

"Maine," says my father, "do you want your Daddy to make the pin part for you?" says my father eagerly.

His hands are idle, now that he's finished carving the needles. I feel bad for him, because he just wants to help his daughter with her work, but that part is Lutz's job. If it were to be taken away from him, then since

we'd no longer be making it together, there'd no longer be any justification for him having come along with me to Freida's place and intruding on our meeting. Also, Lutz isn't the kind of person who would accept money for doing nothing, so if he doesn't actually help make the pins, despite the fact that he's always been there with me as I go around, he'll be the only one who doesn't make any money from this.

"You can be emotional support! Carving is Lutz's job, please don't take it from him."

"It's always Lutz, Lutz, Lutz. Maine, why are being so cold to your Daddy lately?"

My father, ever easy to read, sulks. He has way too much love for his family, so he gets strangely jealous about Otto and Lutz, to the point where sometimes it just gets annoying. I breathe a sigh, then shake my head.

"If you want to make a hairpin, why don't you not make pins for the other kids, but make one for my baptism? I'm planning on wearing a hairpin, so I kind of want something like before, with a hole in it..."

"Oho, what's this, Maine? You don't want me to make them for the other kids, because you'd get jealous?"

Wrong. I have no idea where you could have possibly gotten that impression.

My father smiles broadly, due to whatever bizarre thoughts are bouncing around in his head, and starts working on making my hairpin. Since his mood is instantly good again, I shift my focus back to my needles. While I was busy talking to him, Tory and my mother have raced way ahead of me.

"I think we should be good on the red flowers now. Let's finish up the ones that we're doing now."

I needed to make several roses like the first, but with three people working on it, it's done in a flash. My mother is particularly fast. I, the one who is actually being paid to do this, am the by far the slowest.

"Whaaat? Done already?"

Tory pouts in dissatisfaction, perhaps because she found the knitting far more enjoyable than expected, but I merely shrug my shoulders as I finish forming the last of the roses into shape. Originally, my plan had been to have the left and right hairpins each have three miniature roses, but by the time I noticed how quickly they were getting made we had enough for four on each side. Given the size of each of them, we really don't need any more than this.

"It wouldn't be right for us to waste any of the thread that someone else lent to us, right?"

"Ah, that's right. We shouldn't use such a pretty thread on something useless."

Downhearted, Tory quietly agrees, then starts putting away her needles.

"The next step is to make a lot of little flowers out of the white thread that I've asked Mister Benno for. I think white thread would match this red very well, so I think it would be a good thread to use. When I bring it back with me tomorrow, Tory, if it's okay with you, you can help me with the white flowers too."

"Sounds like fun!"

Tory smiles happily as she picks up her sewing box.

...Hmmm, if Tory's like this, I wonder if it would be okay for her to skip making baskets for her winter work and help me make hair ornaments instead?

The next day, Mark, Lutz, and I head out to the thread warehouse so that we can stock up on supplies. It's the same shop that the craftsman we hired to make the paper mat took us to previously. The shopkeeper immediately stands up when he sees us, perhaps because we'd made such a big impression last time after buying the highest-quality spinne silk from him.

"Ah, if it isn't the folks who bought spinne silk a while ago! Are you here to buy some more?"

"Yes," replies Mark, "we'll be coming back another day with our

craftsman to make another purchase. Today, though, we're here to inquire about a different kind of thread."

Mark's words remind me of what Benno said earlier, that he'd have the craftsman make another paper mat for us by springtime. My head has lately been full of thoughts about Freida's hairpins and my winter handiwork, but I can't let myself forget about any of the preparations that need to be done in order for us to make paper come spring.

...I want a notebook. I don't want this slate, which gets erased whenever anything gets rubbed against it. I really want a notebook.

"What can I help you with today?"

"Umm," I say, "I'm looking for a white thread that would match this one."

I pull Freida's thread from my tote bag and hand it to the shopkeeper. He stares at it closely, then hums thoughtfully.

"This is a very high-quality thread. What I've got that wouldn't strange next to it would be... these ones."

He pulls out two kinds of thread and sets them down in front of me, then places the red thread next to them. After I spend some time looking back and forth between them to compare, I pick up the one that makes the red pop out a little more, then hand it to the shopkeeper.

"Could I please get 100 feli of this thread, and 100 feli of that green you have there. Also, I'd like many different colors of the cheapest thread you have. I'd like 200 feli of each of those, please."

I need to separate the thread for Freida's hairpins and the thread for my winter handiwork into two separate orders. I take out the order form set (the blank wooden order forms, the tape measure, the ink, and a wooden pen) that I always keep in my totebag. When I've finished describing the orders to the shopkeeper, I write them out immediately, my wooden pen clacking against the wood of the order forms.

A lot of the cheaper threads don't have particularly good coloring, but for only two large copper coins I can't really make a huge fuss about it.

These hairpins aren't things that'll be worn in everyday life, just for formal events. If the price is high enough that people would regret purchasing it for just a single occasion, the few people will buy it. I can't let myself set my expectations by the six small silver coins the guild leader will pay for his granddaughter's two pins.

"These threads for your winter work will take some time for me to prepare, so how about I deliver these to your shop once I'm done with them?"

"Yes, please do."

I put the high-quality white thread that I'll be immediately using in my tote bag, then head out of the shop. Since the thread warehouse is close to Lutz and my houses, we split off from Mark in front of the thread warehouse and head back home. As we head home, I tell Lutz about how we were already able to finish the red part of the pins last night, and his eyes go wide.

"Huh? Then, you're already ready to finish off the pins? Didn't you say that we had some time left, so you'd take your time on it?"

"Yeah, I think it'll be ready tomorrow or the day after. Mommy and Tory really want to help, and they're way better and faster than me, so they did it in no time at all. If it were just me, it would have taken a lot longer."

My initial estimate of seven to ten days was based on me having to go to either the forest or the shop during the day, and working on the hairpins between dinner and bedtime. I hadn't even considered the possibility that I might somehow finish everything off in just a single day.

"Got it. I'll get started on my pin part immediately."

"Yes, please! My dad really wants to join in and help make it, so..." "Man, seriously..."

Lutz, seeing his work being almost stolen from him, hangs his head, sighing.

"Although... I've been thinking about what we'd do if my family takes all the work from us, but that's not quite right, is it? Merchants are people

who let other people do the work making things so that they can buy and sell them. Mister Benno doesn't make anything himself, but he's still earning a commission off of the things we're making, right?"

"Huh. You're right."

Lutz looks up at me, taken aback. It is not the case that we can't earn any money if we don't actually make anything. Merchants are people who can bring forth money by just moving goods from one place to another. We're still thinking too much like craftsmen.

"This time, we already told the guild leader and Mister Benno that we were going to be making these pins together, so even though it's going to be difficult to change how we think so quickly, the two of us need to study really hard together how to work like a merchant."

"Yeah!"

When I bring the thread home, the work that I had originally planned on doing was, just as I thought, snatched away from me by Tory and my mother.

In the time it took me to make a single small flower, Tory made two, and my mother made four. In the blink of an eye, we were finished. Next, I was got ready to start making little leaf decorations out of the green thread, but the two of them wound up making the vast majority of them. Once again, I find myself pretty damn useless.

Chapter 41: Hairpin Delivery

“...Hey, Maine,” says Lutz, his face twitching as he sees the pin. “Isn’t this way different from Tory’s hairpin? This is super pretty.”

The reasons are simple. First, we used a thread of much higher quality. Since the flower are made from a thinner, smoother thread, they are much finer and glossier. Secondly, the level of skill that went into them is very different. Unlike Tory’s hairpin, where the vast majority of the flowers were made by my pin, about eighty percent of the flowers on Freida’s hairpins were made by my mother and Tory, so they’re much more detailed and elaborate.

“When you think about what her dress is made of and her general atmosphere, don’t you think that this suits her a lot better than Tory’s would?”

“I have zero idea what you mean when you keep asking if something suits or doesn’t suit someone,” he says, shaking his head.

I cross my arms, deep in thought. “Hmmm,” I say, “that’s something you’re going to need to learn too, since it looks like Mister Benno is starting to carry a lot more things that are marketed to the nobility.”

Lutz lets his eyes wander off to the distance, perhaps because he doesn’t really want to look at something he’s bad at.

“Heyyy, Maine. Now that we’re done, what do we do?”

“I think that we should show it to Mister Benno first, and then deliver it to the guild leader. How about we try heading to Mister Benno’s shop now?” “Sounds good.”

The finished hairpins have been placed in a small box, the top of which is covered by the nicest handkerchief in my house so that nobody can see what’s inside.

“Maine, you hold the box. I’ll carry that bag for you.”

With my slate, slate pencils, and ordering set in my tote bag, it’s gotten reasonably heavy, by my standards. Grateful, I quietly hand it over to Lutz,

and receive the small box in exchange.

“Ah,” says Mark when he sees us arrive, “what brings the two of you here today?”

“We’ve completed the hairpins. I thought that it would be a good idea if, before we delivered it to the guild leader, we showed it to Mister Benno first, maybe...”

“Oh? Show me,” says Benno, unexpectedly, from right behind me. Startled, I jump slightly in place.

When I turn around, I see that he’s standing behind me, dressed impeccably in magnificent clothes, perhaps having just come back from visiting the nobility.

“Welcome back, Master Benno,” says Mark. “Hey,” he replies, nodding. He looks down at me and Lutz. “...Come along, you two.”

We follow him as he heads into his room, deeper in the shop.

“So, then,” he says as he sits down at the table, “where are these completed hairpins?”

I hold out the small box for Benno to see, removing the handkerchief that covers it.

“What do you think about pins like this?”

“...Maine, you... did not need to charge half price for the second one of these.”

“Um? I still think that we’re massively overcharging even after that... since the only real materials cost is the thread, we’re making about three small silver coins worth of profit, right?” “You’re going to have to learn how much things are worth. Every single thing you’ve brought to me has been a luxury good. If you don’t know how to correctly price high-quality luxury items like these, you’ll throw the market into absolute chaos.” “... I’m sorry.”

I’m well aware of how my own intuition does not mesh at all with how goods are priced in this world, so I can very much appreciate how Benno

has had to become a breakwater against the tide of chaos I might bring to the town's market. I already knew that clothing and decoration were high-priced goods, but since I don't have the strength to walk around the town from store to store to do any research, I don't have a sense for what kinds and qualities of things are being sold for what prices. On top of that, given my age and my bearing, I'd likely be refused entry to any shops that dealt in those kinds of high-priced goods.

...Even still, luxury goods, huh? Simple shampoo, paper, and hairpins all used to be obvious stuff I'd find all around me, after all.

I know, in my head, that the Middle Ages I read about in my books didn't have any of these things, but in my heart I still don't accept it. If something doesn't exist, I keep searching for ways that I could find some sort of substitute or make it for myself.

"Mister Benno," I say, "I'd like to deliver this to the guild leader; what would be the best way to do so? I think I'd like to make an appointment to meet with him."

"Good idea. Now's a good time, how about I show you how to do that?"

He takes out an ordering set, writes out a request to meet with the guild leader, then fills in our names and the purpose for the meeting.

"Now you can deliver this to the third floor of the guild. When they decide on a time for the appointment, a staff member will fill in the details here, then deliver it back to the shop."

"So, should we deliver it on our way home?" "...Ahhh, wait. If it's just the two of you, you'll be easy prey in that place. I'll come along too."

He might be exaggerating the danger of just delivering a meeting request, I think.

We go to the merchant's guild and ascend to the third floor, Lutz and I using our own cards this time. After delivering the request card to the service counter, Lutz and I turn to head home, happy about a job well done, when the receptionist calls out to us.

"Please wait one moment."

“Um?!” “I’ve been instructed that, if two people named Maine and Lutz were to arrive, that I show them in immediately.”

Sure enough, we’re being let through. As I stumble about in flustered confusion, Benno glances down at me and murmurs, “do you see now?”

Whoa, Mister Benno, you were absolutely correct! I’m so glad he came along with us.

The guild leader shows us in when we arrive at his office, although his expression is a little less than agreeable when Benno comes in along with us.

“What can I do for you today?”

“We’ve finished the hairpins, and have brought them here for you.”
“Well then, let’s take a look, shall we?”

I take out the small box I brought with me, remove the handkerchief, and hold it out, as far as I can, towards the guild leader. Since Benno has already given his OK, I think everything will be fine, but I still can’t stop my heart from pounding.

The guild leader peers into the box, then picks out one of the hairpins. He frowns as he inspects it closely, then looks over at me, eyebrows raised.

“...This is very different than the one you showed me last time, is it not?”

“I took extra care to ensure that the product was worth the price you were paying for it. Was the item you saw previously perhaps more to your liking? I had thought to make hairpins that would fit Miss Freida’s hairstyle and clothing better, after speaking with her, but...”

As my face goes pale, wondering if he’s unhappy with it, the guild leader hurriedly shakes his head.

“No, no, I’m merely surprised; I hadn’t expected such an excellent product. I think they really will suit Freida quite well.”

“Ah, really? That’s good to hear.”

As I reassure myself that there’s no way he could possibly reject it, the guild leader’s eyes suddenly gleam.

“Maine, wouldn’t you like to work at m...”

“Maine, it looks like we’re done here. We’re leaving.”

Before the guild leader could even finish his sentence, Benno seizes Lutz’s and my arms and stands up. I contemplate if it’s best for us to leave now, since our business here is done, and quietly follow along behind him. Frantically, the guild leader blocks our path.

“No, wait. Now that this is finally ready, I’d like you to deliver it to Freida yourself. I’m so happy that she’s made friends with another girl. When I hear that she made a friend the same age as her, I was overjoyed!”

Oh ho, Freida’s made a friend? What a joyous occasion!

As I so carefreely contemplate somebody else’s problems, Benno, having heard how moved the guild leader sounds, leans down next to me and whispers quietly in my ear.

“You’ve... become her friend?”

“Um! Me?! ...Ummm, I, I wonder?”

I knew that she had been quite pleased with me, although it was rather one-sided, but I wouldn’t really call this a friendship. However, it would be very difficult for me to deny it out loud in front of the guild leader, who is so obviously overjoyed that his granddaughter has made a friend.

“I hear that she’ll be having sweets ready so that you can come over to play any time you’d like.”

“...Sweets?”

Benno flicks my forehead for letting that reaction slip. I know that I shouldn’t be showing any weakness, but I couldn’t stop myself as soon as the topic of sweet things came up.

“Good! How about I take you to her right now?”

The guild leader picks me up effortlessly, perhaps like he may have picked up Freida before, and brings me out of the room. Benno and Lutz stare, wide-eyed, as I’m abducted literally right from in front of them, then frantically chase after us.

“Hey, wait,” says Benno. “I’m coming with you.”

“Where Maine goes, I go!” says Lutz.

It seems that it’s already been decided that we’re going, but the guild leader’s house is close to the castle walls, even further from my house than Benno’s shop is. To be perfectly honest, if I go, I don’t think I would have enough energy for me to return home.

“...Sir,” I say, “I’m not very strong at all, and I don’t think I can walk any farther today.”

“There’s no real need to walk. We’ll be taking my carriage.” “Carriage?!”

I hadn’t really thought of those as something I could ride on. I’ve seen traders and farmers using wagons and carts, of both the horse-and hand-drawn varieties, along the main streets, but in my sphere of existence, each family is likely to have just one hand-drawn cart, and only adults are able to use them.

This goes without saying, but things like rubber tires do not exist here, so when a cart is loaded with baggage, even an adult has to put quite a lot of effort into pulling it. It’s not at all the kind of thing that a child could use. On top of that, a child would most certainly not be allowed to use such an important item of which the family only has one. We must use our own two feet to get around. That’s that.

Even more, horses are expensive. Donkeys are comparatively omnivorous, but since the hay that horses eat is expensive, even the maintenance costs are unattainably exorbitant.

Tch. Rich people.

As I stew in my envy of the guild leader’s wealthy status, he brings me down to the first floor of the Merchant’s Guild building, and puts me up into his carriage. Lutz and Benno, having come to their senses, catch up to us, getting onto the carriage as well, and all four of us get ready to depart, heading towards Freida’s place to make the delivery.

This is my first time in a horse-drawn carriage.

I've been on a hand-drawn cart before, during last year's winter preparations, but this is my first time riding something that's pulled by an animal. Lutz and I look around constantly, and the guild leader smiles wryly at us.

"Heh. Maine, is this your first time riding a carriage?"

"I've seen them going through the gates and driving on the roads, but neither Lutz nor I have anyone in our families that own one."

This is a vehicle that was intended to pull two adults, so it's rather crowded. The two adults fit exactly on the seats, so Lutz and I are stuck, with apologies, on our butts on the shelf in the back, where luggage is supposed to go. Since we're children, we're somehow able to fit, but it's rather dangerous.

"...It's cramped in here. Benno, get out."

"If I do, Maine comes with me."

Benno and the guild leader glare at each other for a little while, but eventually, the carriage starts slowly moving forward.

"Whoaaoaoaaaa!!"

The cart jostles violently as it moves, making it impossible for me to stay still on my seat. Lutz has found safety by clinging desperately to the railing that's intended to help people get on and off, but I have nothing to grab onto. With every bump of the road, it seems like I'm about to fly entirely out of my seat.

"Maine, come here."

Benno sits me on his lap, one arm around my stomach, pinning me tightly so that I won't fly away. Even still, each shake of the cart sends me almost floating off my butt, and if I'm not careful, the top of my head might slam into Benno's jaw. I knew that a cart without any suspension would be a bumpy ride, but I had no idea it was going to be this awful.

Horse-drawn carriages are not at all elegant vehicles.

"Freida," calls the guild leader, "Maine's brought your hair ornaments!"

“Well, Maine! Welcome.”

Her cherry-blossom hair swaying airily behind her, Freida greets us with a gentle smile on her face.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” I reply. “Madam Freida, it is nice to meet you. My name is Benno. I’ve heard much about you from Maine.”

“Well, I wonder what kind of things she might have said?”

They’re so politely greeting each other, yet this sends shivers down my spine.

Lutz grabs my hand tightly, trembling as we listen to the two of them introduce themselves. I quickly glance over at him, and see that he’s gone pale. Neither of us are at all ready to join in the invisible battle between fellow merchants that’s happening right now. I wonder if the two of us will actually be able to someday send sparks flying with a smile like that?

“Freida,” says the guild leader. Please handle receiving the hairpins from those two and pay them what they’re owed.” “Yes, grandfather.”

As the guild leader leads Benno to his own room, Freida leads Lutz and I to a similar sitting room as last time. Meanwhile, sweet drinks and sweet snacks have been brought out, and an entrancingly sweet smell drifts from the table.

“Girls love sweet things, so I have some prepared so that you can come by to play any time! Maine, whenever you’re free, please come to play.”

“Yes!” I answer, with a transcendent smile.

Lutz pinches my hand under the table.

Argh, that’s right. I cannot let myself succumb to sweet temptation. I mustn’t succumb, I mustn’t s... sniff, sniff, ah, bliss~!

Honey-soaked nuts have been layered on top of a thin pizza dough, baked, sliced, and set out for me.

“Come! Maine, Lutz, please enjoy!”

“Thank you!”

Nom, nom. The ample honey makes it deliciously sweet. What a luxurious confection. Is this heaven?

For a while, I just let myself eat my fill, recalling memories of nut tarts I had in Japan. Sweet things really do bring happiness.

“Thank you very much. It was quite delicious.”

“I’m very happy you thought so. I’ll be sure to convey that to the chef.”

Wow, madam, you have a chef. So, she said she had prepared sweets for us, but her chef prepared them for us, and all she did was bring them out. What a stratified society.

“Now then,” she says, “would you perhaps like to show me the hairpins, now?”

“Certainly. Ah, before that, let me return the remaining thread.” “...Oh my, you don’t really need to.”

No, no, I can’t actually keep an expensive thread like this. When talking to the guild leader or to Freida, I know deep in my heart that there’s nothing more terrifying than getting something for free. I can’t accept things from them so freely. I can’t give into temptation.

“Miss Freida, here are—”

“Maine, the two of us are friends! Please, just call me Freida.”

When such a lovely, cute little girl says something like that with such a dazzling smile, there’s no way I can just say “we aren’t friends, though?”. Flustered, I fumble about for a way out.

“Um? But, you’re a customer...”

“Oh my. ...Well, with this, I’m not anymore!”

Smiling broadly, Freida takes the box containing her hairpins from me, and in exchange, places a stack of six small silver coins in front of Lutz and I.

“I have received my order and paid the bill. Now there’s nothing in the way of our friendship!”

“...Very well.”

With all avenues of escape closed, and in a situation where I can't just say no, I defeatedly nod my head in acceptance. Depending on how you think about it, she's a friend whose appearance does not match her personality at all, so it won't be a problem if I'm a little weird myself. Let's take this as a good thing.

If she's fine with me just calling her “Freida”, I wonder if I can speak a little more casually?

“Umm, then, Freida. Would you like to take a look at the hairpins?”

“Of course! Don't mind if I do.”

Freida gently pinches the handkerchief between two fingers, then pulls it away. When she takes one of the hairpins out of the box, her eyes grow wide.

“Well! How magnificent! Since my baptism is in the winter, snow will have started falling by the time the ceremony comes around, so there won't be any flowers or berries to use as hair ornaments, you know? I've been terribly envious of the children whose ceremonies were in the spring and summer. In a season where all the plants are withered, being able to clad myself in brilliant flowers and green leaves makes me so happy!”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Now that I think of it, Tory had initially said that her hair decorations were going to be flowers that she could pick nearby. In that case, these hairpins should sell very well during the winter.

“Try putting them on,” I say. “I want to see how they look in your hair.”

“I don't quite know how to do that. Maine, might I trouble you to?”

“Sure! If you could give me those...”

I take the hairpins from her, then insert each of them into the base of her pigtails, where they're tied off with string. The small, deep red roses stand out beautifully against her light, cherry-blossom pink hair, further enhancing her general air of maturity.

Roses were definitely the right choice.

“You’re very cute, Freida! Like a fairy of the flowers.”

“You flatter me too much!” she says, daintily covering her mouth as she bashfully giggles. “You’re just like my grandfather.”

This isn’t flattery. If I didn’t know anything about her personality, she’d be the kind of little girl I’d want to kidnap and run away with.

“It’s not flattery! It’s a really cute look, and it suits you. Lutz, you think so too, right?”

“Yeah. When I was just looking at the pins, I didn’t think that they were going to fit you so well. Maine made these to just to match you. You’re super cute.” “.....”

Freida, whose face is growing red and whose cheeks are growing puffy, is clearly not used to being praised like this. I can instantly see from her reaction that she really doesn’t have any siblings or friends.

In this world, it’s common for friends and family to be constantly praising each other. I’ve been extolling Tory’s virtues, and she’s been praising me in return. Lutz praises me whenever I do something, and I’ve started to grow accustomed to praising others as well. It was startling to me at first, to the point where I’d shy away from it, but lately I’ve been able to go along with this kind of constant lip service.

“Even so,” she says, “to be able to build such solid shapes out of thread...”

Freida has extracted the hairpins from her head and has started studying them in careful detail, like Benno and the guild leader had done before. Her eyes have completely become like those of a merchant.

“It’s not all that difficult,” I say. “Even I can do it!”

“...The discovery of this construction method is a very big deal, Maine.”
“Huh?”

Freida sighs lightly, then looks at me with a far more serious expression than I was expecting.

“The wives and daughters of the upper nobility are fond of wearing brightly-colored veils of unblemished embroidery. They also wear decorations made of real flowers that have been frozen in time via magic. However, nobody has any ornaments with shape like this.”

The nobility who use ornaments like this use magic to do so, so perhaps decorations like this were never actually developed? As I hum thoughtfully to myself, Freida continues to explain the magnificence of these decorations.

“There is so much fabric in this house with so much embroidery, but not a single piece of it has this kind of shape. To be able to make a solid object with nothing but thread is completely groundbreaking!”

When she says it like that, I finally get it. This is why Benno said there was no need to sell the second pin at half price. This is, essentially, a new technology. I suddenly feel extremely conspicuous.

Have I, perhaps, done something really, really terrible?

I can feel my face going pale. Freida reaches out grabs my hands tightly.

“Maine, you know a lot of unexpected, unknown things, right? If so, I have a lot of things I can teach you too. So, next time, I want you to just come and chat, not to work! I’ll have plenty of sweets prepared for you, so let’s have a nice long chat, with just us girls!”

“Ah, that sounds—”

Great, I was about to say, but I feel a sharp tug on my hair. I reflexively turn my head, and see Lutz looking at me with a grim face, shaking his head.

Argh, that was close. I almost carelessly agreed to have a nice, long, girls-only chat.

If I’d let that slip, then I’d run the risk of having both Lutz and Benno completely excluded. I’m at a loss for words, with no idea how to actually answer the question, so Lutz steps up in my place.

“We’re going to be very busy from now on, so unfortunately we don’t

have much time to come over and play.”

“Oh my,” she says, smiling peacefully, “but I didn’t ask you, did I?”

She may say that, but my ability to go out is fundamentally dependent on Lutz.

“Maine’s family doesn’t let her go out if I’m not going to be there with her. So, if I’m not here too, Maine won’t be able to come.”

“...Ah, that’s right. There’s no helping it, then. Lutz, you are welcome to come as well.”

Is it because she had this devouring disease as well? Freida immediately understood my situation, then nodded in agreement. Lutz, however, isn’t nodding. He stands unwavering in his denial.

“Like I said earlier, we’re busy.”

“Busy with what?” “We’re starting to get serious about winter preparations. The entire family needs to work together to prepare ourselves for the winter, so there really isn’t any free time for us to come and chat. Also, once snow starts falling, we won’t be able to go outside, right?”

That’s right, unlike Freida, whose family can just buy all the firewood they need, preparing the huge quantity of firewood and making all of the candles we need is extremely difficult. It seems like even Freida knows how difficult winter preparations are, so she just slumps her shoulders, not pressuring us any more.

“...So we can’t see each other until the spring?”

“Aren’t you going to be doing your apprenticeship in the springtime? Is that going to be alright?” “That’ll be just fine. It’s not like my apprenticeship will have me working every day of the week. I’ll have plenty of sweets prepared come springtime, so please do come by to play!”

When spring comes around, Lutz and I will likely be very busy making paper, but since Benno is still keeping that business hidden from the guild leader, I keep my mouth shut.

I give Freida a big nod, then look over at Lutz.

“Now that I think about it, Lutz, you didn’t react much to the sweets, did you? You usually leap right onto whatever food’s in front of you, so why?”

“Master Benno told me to keep a good eye on you, and also the parucakes and the other things you make are way tastier. I like food I can always eat more than occasional sweets. I’d be in trouble if you got taken away.”

It seems that Lutz, who is always hungry, considers maintaining the richness of his current eating habits far more important than eating the occasional sweet. If that’s the case, then I should head to his place with some more new recipes, I think.

“Oh my, I haven’t heard of parucakes before. I would be very interested in trying food you’ve made as well, Maine.”

“Um? That’s, well...”

I couldn’t possibly feed confections made from squeezed-out paru fruit, which would usually be considered bird food, to the pampered daughter of a family like this. Her grandfather would get so angry veins would pop out on his head, and the chef who probably manages their nutritional requirements would go berserk.

“You’re saying that Lutz is good enough to eat your food, but I’m not?” she says, teasingly, wearing the saddest frown.

I may be increasingly flustered, but there’s still no way I can bring parucakes in front of a rich girl.

Lutz chimes in. “The ingredients are... not something we could feed a young lady like yourself.”

“Lutz, you’re so mean!”

Freida pouts. With lips pursed, she pouts. No matter how cutely she may be pouting, though, what’s impossible is impossible. There’s nothing at my house that’s fit for Freida to eat.

Besides, making sweets requires help. There really aren’t many things

that I can prepare entirely on my own. At Lutz's house, I've introduced so many new recipes that I always have four boys who will spare no effort to help in order to eat good food. I can't make anything without ingredients or assistance. Not only am afflicted by the devouring, but I don't think that Freida, who was not only also afflicted but is also a pampered rich girl, would have much in the way of physical strength nor stamina.

"...Umm, so, how about next time, when it's spring, we make something together with the ingredients you have here? Your chef could help us too. If that's the case, we don't need to worry about the ingredients, and there will be people to help us, and your family can have a little more peace of mind? How about it?"

"Well, that's marvelous! That's settled, then."

As soon as we decide on making sweets together, a knock comes at the door shortly before the guild leader and Benno enter.

"Hey," says Benno. "You almost finished? We're leaving."

"Yes, sir," I reply. "Umm, Mister Benno. Could you..."

The six small silver coins that Freida gave us in remuneration are quite a lot of money. To be frank, I'm too scared to carry it myself. As I hold it out for him to look after, he glances at the guild leader.

"Sorry, but do you mind if I borrow your parlor for a moment? I'd like to settle up with these two before we head home."

"Ahh, you wouldn't be here if I hadn't dragged you all out. Please, be my guest."

Benno waits until the guild leader and Freida have left the room, then takes the coins from me and lines them up on the table.

"The materials cost and my commission comes out to three small silver coins; the remaining three are yours. If you hadn't charged half price for the second one, you'd have earned two more."

"...This is enough. If I'd sold these hairpins for any more, I'd feel bad about making the ones we'll sell more cheaply."

Benno snorts, pulling out his coinpurse.

“What do you want to do with the money? Are you going to bring it all home with you?”

“I’d like to deposit one silver at the guild, and bring five large copper coins home with me.” “Me too,” says Lutz.

As if he already knew what we were going to say, Benno has already pulled out his guild card and a handful of copper coins. With a touch of our cards, our accounts are settled. I wrap my five copper coins in my handkerchief and place them in my tote bag.

“The guild leader said he’d bring you back to the guildhall in his carriage. Go with him.”

“What about you, Mister Benno?” “I’ll walk. That carriage is pretty small. Come to the store tomorrow afternoon. Your thread should have arrived by then. We have to decide on a price as well.” “Yes, sir.”

Chapter 42: Winter Handiwork

“Hey, Maine, why is it that you deposit a silver coin at the guild every time? Why aren’t you bringing it all home to your family?”

As we leisurely walk home, having gotten off the carriage at the Merchant’s Guild, Lutz spontaneously asks me this question.

For commoners, who are used to scraping through their daily lives without any money to spare, there isn’t really any concept of “savings”. At most, when autumn comes around, they start stashing away a little money in their dresser drawers for winter preparations. They don’t do anything like depositing money at the Merchant’s Guild. Of course, since kids learn things by watching their parents, even the children bring all of their earnings home to their families and spend it all on living expenses.

“I’m saving for next time’s initial expenses, you know.”

“Next time’s initial expenses?” he asks, his head tilted curiously to the side.

Drawing on our own experiences, I explain it to him.

“Remember how after we decided we were going to make paper, we didn’t have any tools, any money, nor any adults that we could ask for help, so even getting a single nail was really hard and we got in a lot of trouble?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t all that long ago that we had gotten scolded by Benno for begging Otto for help. Lutz, remembering this, smiles wryly.

“We got lucky when Mister Benno bought the formula for my ‘simple shampoo’ in exchange for covering all of our initial expenses, but getting all of those tools took a huge amount of money, right, Lutz? Whenever you’re starting something, you need money.”

“The pot, the wood, the ash, the thread, the bamboo work... now that I think about it, that was really expensive, wasn’t it?”

Lutz, who has recently been visiting various stores for the sake of stocking up on things, understands the quality and cost of things that are sold not at ordinary street stalls, but actual stores. His face goes pale as he realizes just how much the initial investments for our paper-making enterprise really cost.

“And that’s why I’m saving money. Since we made a working prototype for Mister Benno, he said that we were done with initial expenses, right? I think that we’ll need even more tools to keep making paper from now on, and I also want to start making something new, and all of that requires money. Once we make a lot of paper, and we start trying to make books, we’ll need new tools for that too.”

“So, it’s for the next stuff, huh...”

I can’t figure out if Lutz’s expression means he has or has not actually understood this. I stare at him fixedly. He has far more pressing reasons than I to actually need to be saving money, but is he aware of them? I wonder if he hasn’t even noticed.

After thinking about it for a moment, I slowly open my mouth.

“I don’t really want to say or even really think about this, but... Lutz, if by the time we’re baptized your parents still don’t approve of you becoming a merchant, what are you going to do? ...Have you... thought about that?”

His face twists painfully as soon as I ask my question. He answers in a low mumble, without any strength behind his voice at all.

“...I think I’d have to be a live-in apprentice at Master Benno’s shop.”

“Yeah, if you want to become a merchant, you’ll have to do that, right? I’m glad you didn’t say you’d give up.”

When Lutz seems me smiling, he sighs, looking just a little bit relieved. He’s talking about leaving his home behind at such an early age, which takes tremendous resolve, and I think he must still have some doubts about it. Lutz, however, is moving entirely along his own path, which means that he really will be needing money.

“But, Lutz, think about it. If you leave home to become a live-in

apprentice, then until your first pay comes in you'll still need money for living expenses, the clothing you'll need for your apprenticeship, and so on. There'll be a huge difference between the Lutz that leaves home with money saved up for his freedom and the Lutz that doesn't have anything."

"Ah..."

Lutz raises his head to look at me, looking completely taken aback.

"I don't think it's bad at all for you to take the money that you yourself earned and save it away for your own future, you know. I know we're supposed to be giving everything we earn to the family, so you might feel guilty about it, but you're not even old enough to be really working, anyway, and you brought home thirteen large copper coins over five days, you know? That's more than Ralph brings home from his apprenticeship, you know? So it's really okay."

"Huh... I make more than Ralph."

Lutz smiles proudly. Ralph, who's still only recently started his apprenticeship, probably brings home only about eight to ten large copper coins over an entire month. The amount the two of us have earned is huge in comparison.

"Maine, thanks. I'm feeling way better about this now."

"I'm glad!"

Grinning broadly, Lutz suddenly turns away from me for some reason, then squats down.

"What're you doing, Lutz?"

"Get on my back," he replies. "What?" "We've gone to a lot of different places today, so you must be getting tired, right? You're looking a little pale."

Without thinking about it, I reach up to feel my face. I still don't feel particularly feverish, so I don't think I have a fever.

"...I'm looking pale?"

"It's not that bad right now, but we need to be meeting with Master

Benno tomorrow afternoon, so I think you shouldn't push too hard. My number one job is looking after your health, after all." "...Alright. Thanks, then!"

It's very true that, after a day of walking from place to place, I'm getting rather worn out. Since Lutz is telling me not to push too hard, things must be getting really dangerous.

Lutz takes me home, with me on his back. I, of course, climb the stairs up under my own power, but since there's a chance I might get too tired halfway up, Lutz comes up with me, leading me by the hand. He's seriously a big help.

To be perfectly honest, climbing the stairs up to my home is the hardest part.

"I'm home, Mommy."

"Oh my, Lutz! It's rare for you to come all the way up here, isn't it? Is Maine not doing well today?" "We'd originally planned to just go show the hairpins to Master Benno today, but we wound up meeting the guild leader too, and then he invited us to his house immediately. He said that he wanted us to deliver the hairpins in person. So, I think that she's probably very tired right now." "I see. Thanks as always, Lutz. You're a big help."

As she says that, she slips a bribe, a medium copper coin, into his hand. When I see the coin, I remember something.

"Ah, that's right! Mommy, I want to give you this before I forget."

"Maine... what in the world have you done now?"

When my mother sees the five large copper coins I hold out for her, all the color drains from her face. Her eyes go as wide as I've ever seen them, as if there's no way she could have possibly thought that the hairpins were worth anywhere close to that much money.

"This is the money from making the hairpins for Freida. I said that she was buying them for a lot of money because they were so rare, right?"

“I heard you say that, but... really, this much money...”

I’m sorry, Mother. There’s no way that I can tell you that this is after the introduction, handling, and materials fees as well as the small silver coin I set aside for my own personal use. Not with this atmosphere, anyway.

“Is this true, Lutz?” she asks him. “She’s not lying, Auntie Eva. Since I worked on it too, I got the same amount too. Maine and I split it halfway.”

As he says it, he shows my mother his own share of the money. With that, my mother is finally convinced, and places a hand on her chest to calm herself down.

Hey, wait, Mother. I’m your daughter, why don’t you believe me?

“Master Benno called us out to his shop tomorrow as well, so we’re going to have to go there again. So, I want to make sure Maine gets as much rest as she can.”

“Thanks again, Lutz.”

After we see Lutz off, my mother closes the door behind him with a clack. With her eyebrows raised, she throws me straight into bed.

“Don’t overdo it, Maine. Even so, you sold that for a lot of money, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Freida’s really rich, and the thread was really high quality, and we made two instead of just one, you know? Plus, since everyone’s so busy this season with winter preparations, she paid a high fee for that, too. So, if we make it for other people, it’s not going to be that expensive.” “I see! She was being considerate, since it’s such a busy season for us.”

It seems like my mother’s image of the guild leader and Freida is one of kind, gentlemanly rich people who consider the plight of the poor. Since I don’t think she’s ever going to actually meet these two, I don’t think I need to dispel her illusions. My mother, relieved now that she knows why her child brought home so much money, heads out of the bedroom so that she can work on preparing dinner for the family.

I, left behind in the bedroom, really do feel like a heavy weight presses

down on me. As soon as I lay down on the bed, I start drifting off and soon, without even eating dinner, fall into a deep sleep.

When I awaken, it's already morning. Since I'm going to be going to Benno's shop in the afternoon, I decide that I should spend the morning resting. It's only about half my choice. Thanks to the fact that I've been going out quite a bit lately, my body is still rather heavy despite the fact that I got quite a bit of sleep. My family, seeing flickers of signs that my fever may be returning, have forcefully thrown me back to bed as they do their winter preparations.

"Maine, be good and rest up," commanded my father as he inspected our wooden front door. "You've been working too hard lately! You're making more money than Daddy, you know?"

Tory and my mother, as they spread out the thick blankets and carpets we'll be using during the winter so they can air out, tell me, "You're going to Mister Benno's shop today as well, aren't you? If you don't sit quietly this morning, you're going to collapse again, you know?"

"Maine, you're not really useful for winter preparations, so focus on what you're actually good for."

And, with that, they prohibit me from leaving my bed. Since there's nothing else I can do, I squirm my way back under the blankets, watching as my family ceaselessly moves about, working on their preparations.

This year, unlike last year, I actually understand what goes into preparing for the winter, so I really thought I could be a little more useful, though...

I think my family's excessive care might be because I came home yesterday, delivered five large copper coins to my mother, then promptly fell fast asleep. I, who can't even satisfactorily do a single thing around the house to help out, earned thirteen large copper coins over the course of not even five days, and then slept so soundly that I missed dinner. They suspect, in their minds, that I must have been doing some absurdly hard labor.

However, over the past few days, I've been going around to a lot of

different places, which for me really is a kind of hard labor.

When the fourth bell rings at noon, I grab my tote bag as usual and head out the front door, dressed to keep out the cold.

“I’m off,” I say.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs and meet Lutz, he greets me with a little frown.

“Maine, you don’t look too good, you know? Isn’t it okay if I go by myself?”

“It’s because we’ve been so busy lately. Mister Benno said that we were going to talk about pricing for our winter handiwork today, though, so I’m going today. I’ll leave carrying the thread to you, Lutz, but I want to go so that I can handle deciding on a price.” “...Right, pricing, yeah. I still don’t really understand that.”

I can’t, of course, leave deciding prices to Lutz yet, since he still doesn’t understand numbers very well. Today, I just want to go to the shop and discuss things relating to the pricing of the hairpins with Benno.

“Well, at least let me carry you there.”

“What? No, I can’t ask that. You already carried me home yesterday...” “I’m going to be carrying all the thread back with me today, so I can’t carry you then. So, save your energy for now.”

I know full well that it’s impossible to get Lutz to back down when he gets this stubborn in times like this, so I get up on his back. Even though I’ve grown a little bit taller, I feel like Lutz has gotten even bigger. Although I know it’s because of my illness, it’s still a little frustrating that there’s this much of a difference in size despite us being the same age.

“Lutz? It seems that you’re carrying Maine, is she all right?”

When Mark sees Lutz approach with me on his back, he rushes towards us, with startled eyes wide open. He reacts far too sensitively to my physical condition. It seems like me collapsing to the ground right in front of him caused quite a bit of trauma. I’m really, really sorry about that.

“...Lately, we’ve been going out every single day to go to various places, so she’s started to get a little tired. I think she’ll probably be stuck in bed after tonight. So, I’d like to finish up our business as fast as we can.”

“I understand,” he says with a nod, then leads us to the room in the back. “Master Benno, Maine and Lutz have arrived.” “Bring 'em in.”

The door opens with a creak, and Mark shows us in, following shortly behind us.

“Lutz has informed me that Maine’s condition is not very good today. Please consider conducting your business with haste today.”

“Got it. Sit down, you two.” “Yes, sir.”

As soon as we arrive at the table, we immediately begin discussing our winter handiwork. Benno informs us of the price of the thread, I estimate how many we could make with these quantities of material, and we decide on a price.

“Mister Benno, I’d like to avoid making these hairpins too expensive. Since the thread we’re using is cheap as well, could we maybe price it as cheaply as we need to so that many people would be able to purchase them?”

“I understand how you feel, Maine, but there’s no way I can sell these at a bargain right from the start. The price is only going to decrease once a lot of these start entering the market. We should be selling these for about three large copper coins at first.”

Since these are for special occasions, that’s a price that my family could hypothetically afford, although it would be a bit of a reckless expenditure. It’s a little harsh, I think, but if sisters could share them with each other, somehow... if I consider that prices will slowly go down from this initial price, I think I can say that this is alright.

“If that’s the case, that’s fine, then. I understand.”

After I nod in agreement, the conversation next moves onto Lutz and my share of the profit.

“For each hairpin, your cut is about five medium coins after the materials cost and my commission. I’ve set it higher than usual, since this is a new handicraft and there’s nobody else I can order these from.”

“Five medium copper coins is high?! Doesn’t that mean that we really ripped the guild leader off for Freida’s hairpins?!”

At the price Benno had negotiated, our share after making two hairpins should have been five small silver coins. That’s a hundredfold increase in price.

“That was based on that old bastard’s opening bid, so don’t worry about that.”

“...So, ordinarily, how much would we be getting?”

Last year, I helped Tory out with her basket-weaving handiwork, but the two of us were never actually given any of that money, so I was never really curious about how much each one was actually worth.

“For things like winter handiwork, us merchants take our commission, then the master of the sewing or craftsman’s workshops takes his cut as well, so the amount that the people who actually make the thing would get is about one medium copper coin per item, I think? Since this order is going direct to you, without going through a workshop, your cut is high.”

“What?! One medium copper coin... it’s that little?!”

After my initial shock wears off, I remember that the things people back in Japan made at home for a little side income were also pretty cheap. Something like a beaded strap would be something like 50 yen each. If I think about it like that, one medium copper coin each isn’t that surprising. Getting five coins is actually extraordinary.

“At workshops, the only people who can actually buy and sell things are basically just the masters. The amount any given workshop master takes can vary somewhat, though? Maine, don’t you have any experience with that?”

Since I said we could make hairpins for winter handiwork, he’s asking, don’t we already know how this works? I think about what happened last

year.

“Last year, I helped my older sister Tory with her work. I was working without any actual knowledge of how much they cost or what the commissions were, and I didn’t see any of the money from that. Huh? Now that I think about it, since we were selling something, we needed a guild membership, wouldn’t we? I wonder if my mother’s registered?”

The one who delivered Tory’s and my handiwork was my mother, but I’ve never once heard her mention anything about going to the Merchant’s Guild. When I said I’d gone, she’d asked about it as if it were something very rare.

“Ah, so your mother runs a street stall, does she?”

“No, she usually works as a dyer, I think.” “If that’s the case, then that was probably work given to her for the winter. Since each worker just delivers the products of work she was assigned to do by her job, there’s no need for each of them to be registered with the Merchant’s Guild. It’s fine if the master’s the only one registered, as a representative of the studio.”

It seems that the managers at the places where craftsmen work handle the actual buying and selling of things, so individual employees don’t need to be registered as merchants. Instead, it seems like craftsmen register with the various crafting guilds.

Whoa, this is the first I’m hearing about that. Then, if I were to get help on making the hairpins, it would have to be after they meet their quotas.

“In other words, last year’s handiwork was assigned to my mother at work, and Tory helped her out with that, and then I helped Tory out in turn.”

“What did you make?” “I made things like this. This is the first one I made, so it’s very simple, but I made the others I helped with in my spare time a lot more elaborate.”

Triumphantly, I hold up my totebag to show it off. Benno, in response, smiles bitterly, rubbing his temples.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “...So it was you, again?”

“Huh?”

Why is he saying “again”? Now that I think about it, I think I’ve seen that particular bitter smile before. Have I, once again, done something bad?

“I recall that amongst all of the baskets being sold near the end of spring, there certainly were some number of finely decorated bags like that. For winter handiwork, if you can’t handle the quantity, your income won’t increase. Since it’s quick and dirty work, there’s a lot of roughly woven baskets out there, so those really stood out far too much, I’m afraid.”

“Nooooooooooooo!”

I, in my free time, tried making somewhat elaborate handbags, and then taught Tory how to do it... I never thought that those would stand out so much on the market.

“I wanted to know who made them, and I was able to track down the workshop they came from, but since all of the winter handiwork was turned in basically all at once, I wasn’t able to determine the specific craftsman who’d made them.”

“Ah, that’s good~... you didn’t find out...”

I’m well aware that I’m a little different, so I’ve been trying to keep myself hidden from the world as much as I can, but I have a feeling that doing so might not actually be possible.

“Since a bag you made for yourself would be, of course, as durable as you could make it, I didn’t think that the one you carry was particularly unnatural, and there aren’t any decorations on it, so I hadn’t made the connection until now, but... it seems like every single mysterious thing I’ve seen in the last half year or so have all come from you, Maine.”

Elaborate bags, hairpins, simple shampoo, paper... now that I’m actually counting them out, I’m growing increasingly perplexed. Now that I’ve heard Benno’s perspective, I can’t actually say that my actions were at all those of someone who wanted to stay hidden. Feeling so amazingly

ashamed that I have no idea what else to do, I apologize in a tiny voice.

“...I’m sorry, I guess.”

“Well, whatever. More importantly, it looks like you have a tendency to make things elaborate in your free time. For the hairpins, just make the same design as the first one you did. Don’t change it arbitrarily. This is final. Got that?” “I understand. The colors on them will be different, but they’ll all have a unified design.”

I never would have thought that the bags I made last year would have stood out so much, and I definitely do not want any new hairpins to stand out so terribly as the ones I made for Freida. I can sidestep this problem entirely by making sure that the design of each hairpin matches the rest.

“I think that concludes all of the business we need to talk about for now. Ah, that’s right; you said you wanted to study during the winter, didn’t you? I’ll lend this to you for now, look over it when you get home.”

“...What’s this?”

When I look down at the wooden notes he hands me, he firmly pinches my cheek.

“When you get home! Got it?!”

“Yeth!!” “Good grief.... You can bring it back when your fever’s gone back down. Head home right away and get some sleep. Lutz, keep an eye on this idiot. She looks like the type to get in some kind of accident walking home because she’s too busy reading.”

Suddenly remembering the time during my Urano years where I was heading home from school with my nose in a book and got hit by a car, I shut my mouth tightly and look away in embarrassment.

As we leave, Mark gives us the basket he’s prepared for us, full of the thread that we had ordered, which Lutz takes. We depart for home, with Mark seeing us off with an extremely concerned look on his face. We take it at a slow, leisurely pace. On the way, I ask Lutz about something that I want to discuss with him before I’m stuck in bed for a while.

“Hey, Lutz, about splitting things up on the hairpins...”

“What’s up?” “Since the flower part takes way more time to make than the pin part, do you think we can split it three coins to two?” “Sounds good. If we’re thinking about the time it takes, I’d be fine with four to one, I think.”

If we’re just thinking about time, then Lutz has the better suggestion, but I’ve got a somewhat different reason behind asking for three to two.

“In that case, since your math is so terrible, let’s stick with three to two.”

“My math?” “Right! This time, we’ll each take one coin for our commission, and we can pay two medium copper coins for each flower part, and one coin for each pin part. Why don’t we get our families to do those?” “Huh? Our families?”

Lutz tilts his head doubtfully, as if he has no idea what I could possibly be saying. I press on.

“Yeah! If I think about my own speed for the flower parts, I don’t think I could make any more than about thirty of them a month. Since we’d be in a fix if we had a lot of pin parts left over, how about to start with you get your family to make thirty pins in a month? Then we can charge a commission for them.”

“And that’s so we can become merchants?”

Lutz, remembering our earlier discussion about the differences between merchants and craftsmen, seems to be understanding the point I’m trying to get at.

“Right, don’t you want to start acting like Mister Benno? You need to study really hard in order to be a good merchant’s apprentice, you know? I think it’s impossible to make only the hairpin part. Well, if you make any yourself, then I think you can do whatever you want with the money you make from the stuff you make, though.”

This is effectively holding money back from our families, which I also don’t feel very comfortable with, but we’re going to be merchants. If we give our families preferential treatment like that, we won’t be able to

make a living in commerce anytime soon.

After I explain it to him, Lutz stares down at the ground for a while, but soon he firmly raises his head.

“...I’ll give it a try.”

Since I’m the one who’ll be making the flower parts, the thread for doing so should go in my house, so Lutz carries it all the way up to our door. This is only natural, but my entire family is so shocked by the fact that we’ve come home with such a huge quantity of thread that they stop working on their winter preparations.

“Lutz, what’s all this thread for?”

Hey, you know, why are you asking Lutz that and not your own daughter?

Grumbling about our difference in reliability, I offer an explanation anyway.

“This is the thread for making hairpins. Since Benno’s going to buy the finished product from us, he bought the thread for us in advance. This is the raw materials for my winter handiwork, so don’t just use it on your own!”

“I understand,” says my mother. “Thanks again, Lutz. Here, eat this, it’s tasty!”

She hands Lutz a small bottle, filled with the jam she’s just finished. Lutz gladly accepts it, smiling brilliantly, and then leaves for home with a bounce in his step.

“I’ll get this into the storeroom,” says my father, “so Maine, get to bed.”

He picks up the basket full of thread to bring to the storeroom, shooing me briskly towards the bedroom.

“Urgh, at least let me wash off first! I didn’t get to yesterday, and I went out today too so now I feel really gross.”

“Perfect timing,” says Tory, “the water’s just starting to get hot. I wanted to get clean too, so I’ll bring it in for you.” “Thanks, Tory.”

For the last year, I've been regularly wiping ourselves down to get clean, along with Tory. Lately, she's started feeling bothered whenever she goes more than three days without washing off. She sets things up for bathing in the bedroom in the spot that's closest to the stove and thus the warmest. As she washes herself off, she starts speaking with an earnest tone.

"Maine, last year you didn't know how to do anything at all, so I was super surprised when you found yourself a job all by yourself, you know."

"Are you making baskets this year, too?" I ask, soaking a towel into the bucket and then wringing it out.

Tory moves her pleated hair out of the way, wiping down the area around her scalp, while explaining her plans to me.

"Yeah. Mom's work is worth way more than I can make from the handiwork at my job. I'm going to be cutting up the wood we'll need for making baskets from now on, and peeling all the bark off."

"Oh, really? You don't absolutely have to do the handiwork from your own job?"

Was she not assigned anything to do by the master of her workshop? I tilt my head curiously to the side, since I'd heard from Benno that they worked on a quota. Tory chuckles quietly.

"It's just pocket money. There's other people that make a lot, and some people are also busy making clothes for their families, so it's not mandatory, you know?"

"Aaah, so everyone's got their own deal."

I thought that I could get Tory to help me out after she'd filled her own quota, but if she doesn't really have to actually meet a quota, then I wonder if there isn't any problem with having her help me right from the start?

I briefly look over at her, smiling broadly.

"What I'm making this year is hairpins, like the one I made for you. I can

make two medium copper coins for each one I make like that.”

“Huh?! Really?! That’s a lot of money, isn’t it? Can I help too?” “Yeah, let’s work together!”

When I say that, Tory gets really happy and excited. Her eyes brighten at the thought that if she makes a lot of them, she can get some pocket money.

“Hey, hey, Maine. Can I do anything to help prepare?”

“Mister Benno already got us all the thread, and Lutz is making the pins, so we don’t need to do any more preparing. As long as we’ve got thin needles, we should be fine.” “This’ll be super nice if we don’t have to do any groundwork first,” she says, laughing gleefully to herself.

Her smile suddenly freezes. She blinks her eyes once, then points at something behind me. When I turn my head around to see what’s the matter, I see my mother standing behind me, scowling, tapping one hand against her cheek, thinking about something with a profoundly serious look on her face.

“Hey, Maine. Once I’m done with your new dress, I can help too, right?”

Lutz, what do we do now?

My mother’s getting fired up.

Chapter 43: Lutz's Education Plan

That, at least, has been what I've been thinking over the past three days. Although I'm getting increasingly irritated about my unbroken fever, I get scolded whenever I try to leave my bed on my own, so even though I'm sluggish from oversleeping I can't do anything but stay in bed.

...Aaaaaaargh, so bored.

Today is pig-slaughtering day. Unlike last year, I've managed to gain enough of my family's confidence that they're letting me stay here and watch the house by myself, so the headed out for that early in the morning. They made a sandwich for my lunch and filled everyone's cups with water and left them in the bedroom for me so that I would neither get too hungry nor get too thirsty without any way to deal with it.

In this dead-silent bedroom, I technically could move around if I wanted to, but I know that all that would do for me is make my fever linger even longer, so I don't have any choice but to stay quietly in bed. However, with nobody to even talk to, there's no helping it: I am so, so bored.

If only I had a book...

I have a tremendous quantity of failed prototype paper with me, but I still haven't used it. All it's been doing since I've brought it home has been sitting in the box at the foot of my bed, neatly stacked to one side, gathering dust. Ever since we successfully finished our prototype, I've simultaneously been really busy and really fired up about wanting to make my first book.

Above all, though, since these are failed prototypes, both the material quality and sizes are all over the place. While I do have some paper that's almost successful, I also have pieces that are such total failures that are badly ripped or crumbling to pieces. There's paper that's so thin that it's nearly see-through, to the point where I'm almost scared to touch it, and paper that we reinforced so much that it looks brittle enough to break.

Out of the pieces that were almost perfect, the ones that got twisted when we tried to paste them up to dry out are still probably the easiest to

use. If I were more skilled with my knife, I might be able to use the sheets that dried successfully but we couldn't remove without ripping big holes in them, but cutting out only the pieces of the page that are actually usable proved to be surprisingly difficult. I really want a tiny, slender blade with a very sharp cutting edge, like a hobby knife. That would be much easier to cut with.

I think that if I wanted to make a book with this paper it would take a considerable amount of time. This winter I'll have a lot of extremely productive free time, it seems.

...Ah! Now that I think about it, even if I don't have a book, I have the board that Mister Benno gave me.

I remember that, before my fever flared up, Benno told me that I should look this over when I returned home. I think that I'll probably be fine if I read it while lying in bed.

I get up unsteadily, open the box that I keep my clothes in, and retrieve the approximately A4-sized board from my tote bag. Flopping back down on the bed, I start to read.

"This is... the outline of a training course for new employees."

It contains a listing of the minimum amount of knowledge that it's been decided that newly-entering apprentices should be taught. To break the contents down into broad categories, apprentices will need to know:

- How to look after their appearance and give proper greetings.
- How to write all of the fundamental letters and numbers.
- How to use a calculator.
- How to perform monetary exchanges to a certain degree.
- The list of commodities in which the shop trades.
- The names of the merchants that associate with the shop.

"Hmmm, the things the two of us can study ourselves are... writing, math, and monetary exchanges, I think. Everything below that is probably going to be taught to all of the new employees during training, so I think we can put it off for now..."

As I monologue, mumbling, I start making study plans for the winter.

First off, I wonder how many of the fundamental letters and numbers Lutz remembers? I taught them to him a while ago, but they're the kind of things that you tend to forget if you don't use. I'll need to verify what he's forgotten, then teach those to him again. Instead of practice sentences, I wonder how well it would work if I had him write out order forms, formal introductions, and so on? They're full of vocabulary words that he'll need for work, so I don't think there's much harm there.

To be perfectly honest, I actually don't know how to write many words that aren't strictly work-related. Here, there's no dictionary, and the words that have been taught to me were either drilled into me by Otto so that I could help him with the budget or are merchant-related ones taught to me by Benno or Mark. I think I've got a solid grasp on my work-related vocabulary. However, I don't know how to write any common nouns or verbs.

"As for using calculators, I know how to add and subtract, but I've never asked Mark about how to do multiplication or division on them so I don't know that yet, hmmm..."

I can work out all sorts of calculations by hand on my slate, but it's essential for me to learn how to be able to use a calculator, too. In order to avoid standing out too much from the other apprentices, I should be able to do things the same way that everyone else does.

"I really want to teach Lutz first-through third-grade arithmetic, but I don't have either textbooks or workbooks, so teaching him is going to be really tough. Since I have to prioritize, I think the counting system and doing large monetary conversions is probably the biggest priority, and then getting him to do addition and subtraction, at least in the ones digit. Then, we can move on to the general concepts of multiplication and division... wait, can we actually do this over the winter?"

Drilling in how to work with numbers takes three years, so of course doing all of it over the course of a single winter is impossible.

As I let out a heavy sigh, I notice that my fever is wriggling around inside

me, a pressure building up like it's about to burst open. I press my fingertips into my temples, gritting my teeth.

I don't actually scream "don't come out," though.

Imagining tightly screwing on a lid, I shut it back away, then breathe a sigh of relief. It hadn't been for very long, but fighting against the devouring has actually made me hungry. I reach over and pick up the sandwich my family had left for me. I take a big bite then, while I chew noisily, start thinking about personal appearance and greetings.

"Now this is the biggest problem: looking after our appearance and giving proper greetings. Neither of us really know to what extent a merchant needs to prepare their appearance, or what kind of greetings and phrases are unique to merchants, if any..."

I have some idea of what the work clothes, which we will have to buy, are like, having seen the various employees at both Benno's shop and the Merchant's Guild. I have no idea how much any of that would actually cost, so I'll need to verify that with Benno later.

As for the greetings, those are on the list of things I want someone to teach me. I already know that people here don't ever greet each other by bowing, but I don't know what the correct way to greet someone in the merchant world actually is. All I've seen is people smiling at others who they've just met while lying through their teeth. Although, I have a hunch that neither Benno nor the guild leader had been doing any sort of typical greeting.

At some point, while I was staring at the board I got from Benno and thinking hard, I gradually drifted off to sleep again. When I wake up, I see my family's already returned home, and are busy bringing their various pork products into the storage room.

"Welcome back," I say. "Oh, hello, Maine! Did we wake you? How are you feeling?"

"...Better, I think."

Now that I'm awake, I actually feel very refreshed, so I think my fever's

gone down. Tomorrow, I'll still be staying at home so we can wait and see, but the day after tomorrow I think I'll be able to move around again.

The next day, Lutz, with a basket strapped to his back, stops by to pay me a visit on his way to the forest. Although my fever's gone down, today's another day in which I shouldn't be leaving my bed, so I'm extremely happy to have someone to talk to, even if it's only for a little bit.

"Hey, Maine! I heard you're feeling better? Tory told me a little while ago, when she met me downstairs."

"Yeah, since last night. I'm staying home all day today to make sure, but tomorrow I think I'll be able to go out." "Oh, okay! It's been a long time since you've been sick for so long, I was worried."

It seems that both Lutz and my family have been very worried, since I haven't had a fever that's lasted this long in quite some time.

"You missed helping prepare the pork this year, too."

"Ahhh, it just can't be helped, this time of year."

I've slowly become more-or-less used to going to the butcher's and seeing chickens get sliced up, but there's no way I can go along with the rest of the family thinking that I'm going to enjoy this onceper-year experience. I still can't even make myself want to participate. I actually caught myself thinking that I was so lucky that it came and went while I was still stuck in bed with a fever.

"Yesterday," I say, "I looked over the board that Mister Benno left us and put together an education plan for us. Tomorrow, I'd like to go to Mister Benno's shop, return this board, and ask him if I could buy a calculator, maybe..."

"...Oh, that's right, what's on that board, anyway?"

Lutz claps his hands together, apparently having only just remembered that the board even existed, and leans forward curiously. He looks like he's ready to listen to every word.

"It's related to the education apprentices get. Lutz, how much of your

letters and numbers do you think you remember?”

“All the ones you taught me...?” he says, tilting his head doubtfully at me like the answer was obvious.

Startled, I open my eyes wide. I didn’t expect in the slightest that he’d completely remember everything.

“What? Really?! You don’t usually use them, but you haven’t forgotten any?!”

“...Well, you know, it’s so rare for someone to be able to teach me things, so once I finally learned how to write, I didn’t want to forget, so I kept writing on the ground or the wall with my finger, and then after I bought my slate I’ve been practicing on that ever since.” “Lutz, that’s amazing!”

Lutz is an even harder worker than I thought. Wait, no; I’ve still been thinking that it’s only natural that people get educated, and that it’s easy to get any information you want whenever you want it. I wonder if this is too naive? I’ve never actually thought about not wanting to learn knowledge that I’d finally received. After all, if I ever forgot it, I could just get a book and read about it again. If I just remembered what kind of books I can find things in, then I could easily obtain, on demand, any information that I wanted. I’ve never had a need to memorize the entire contents of it before.

“Nah, I’m not amazing at all. You’re the amazing one, being able to read really large numbers like you can.”

“Then, I can teach you how to read big numbers too! Pick up that slate.”

I teach him about the ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, and ever-larger digits. The town marketplace uses three-digit numbers, so he can read those easily, but it seems he doesn’t understand numbers larger than that. Holding the slate in place, I run through the digits until Lutz starts counting along with me. After reading them aloud many times, I write up a series of suitably large numbers on the slate.

“Alright, question one. How do you read 78,946,215?”

“Ummm, one, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand,

million, ten million, so..."

Lutz tackles each problem earnestly and, in no time at all, starts to be able to read numbers up to the ten millions. I wonder what's higher, his memory or his concentration skills? Lutz's specs are way higher than I thought they'd be. We'll be able to put a ton of effort into studying this winter.

If he's this smart... there's not actually a single thing I can actually beat him in, is there?

As I start feeling a little sorry for myself, Tory comes back up from downstairs, bringing a bucket of water from the well with her. When she sees Lutz, she shouts in surprise.

"What the... Lutz?! Weren't you supposed to go to the forest? Everyone else left already, you know?!"

"Yikes! Sorry, Maine. I gotta go! Thanks for teaching me!"

Panicking, Lutz shoots to his feet, then dashes out the door. At that speed, he should be able to catch up to everyone else well before they even reach the gate.

The next day, my family grants me permission to leave the house, so Lutz and I head out to Benno's shop in the afternoon, when he has the free time to meet with us. However, when we arrive, the entrance is closed, and a single guard stands quietly outside.

"Huh?" I say. "I guess it's still lunchtime..."

"Want to go back to the central square and sit down for a bit? Standing around the whole time would be really hard, right?" "Yeah, you're right. Finding someplace to sit down sounds like a really good idea right now."

As the two of us discuss how we're going to kill the time, the guard beckons to us, as if he's completely recognized our faces.

"I'll go ask the master if it's okay to let you two in. Would please you wait here for a moment?"

"Yes, sir, and thank you!"

The guard disappears into the shop, then immediately returns, opening the door wide to let us in. Inside, the shop is gloomy with the windows and doors shut. He leads us briskly back to the office in the back and opens the door. Inside, the sunlight streams brightly in through the window, and a brilliant fire burns within the hearth.

“Maine, are you feeling better now?”

Benno, who seems to have been in the middle of some work, sets aside his pen and ink and stands to greet us.

“Yes, sir. I’ve come to return this board to you. I also have some questions I’d like to ask, is that okay?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’ve got some things I’d like to talk with you about too, but you two go first.”

Benno gestures to the table we usually sit at, and prompts me to begin.

“Thank you very much for lending me this,” I say. “Thanks to it, I was able to form some ideas about a plan for studying during the winter.”

“Oh?” “Ummm, as I was reading it, a few questions occurred to me. I understand that taking care of our appearance and giving proper greetings is necessary, but to what degree do we need to take care of our appearance? Also, if merchants have any specific greetings or phrases, unfortunately neither of us actually know them.”

“Ahh,” he says, studying us carefully.

“To start with, although you two are commoners living near the south gate, you aren’t grungy at all, so all you need to worry about is your work clothes. You can get the minimum for about ten small silver coins, so if you start saving now, then by the summer you could probably afford it.”

“Ten small silver coins...,” mumbles Lutz, dumbfounded. “I’m so glad I copied Maine and saved some away...”

To Lutz, whose mother spins thread and makes all of the clothes for her family, the concept of spending ten small silver coins on clothing and shoes comes as an enormous shock. I’m shocked as well, but clothing here

is not something you get off the shelf. It's all made to order, so I thought that the price was going to be something around those lines. It's definitely very expensive, but it's still something that we could buy if we work very hard come springtime to earn money making paper.

"Next is your manner of speech. Maine, you're okay, but Lutz, you need work. You need to learn how to speak politely, otherwise I can't put you out in front of customers the way you talk now."

Lutz, having been singled out, is at a loss for words. Picking up how to speak politely is really difficult if nobody around him does it either. I try to think about who the best person for him to imitate would be, out of all the people we know.

"You could use Mister Mark as a reference for speaking politely."

"...Urrrgh, it makes me really kinda... itchy, though."

I can sympathize with the unstable sort of feeling of being suddenly told to change one's manner of speech to something that's entirely unlike yourself. However, if he's unable to do so, he won't be able to stand out in the front of the shop. This is doubly true in Benno's shop, which is rapidly growing its base of noble clientele. If we want to climb to the top, we absolutely need to learn how to manage our appearance, our speech, and our manners.

"That's okay," I reassure him. "You can do it if you try! You know how Benno usually talks one way, then in front of customers he's suddenly speaking very politely? It would be great if you could do the same thing when you're dealing with customers, too."

Even though I've never actually seen Benno switch to a more polite manner of speech, even when talking to the guild leader, I'm certain that if he thought he had to, he could do it in a heartbeat. Otherwise, he'd be a terrible fit for a merchant.

"There's no real need for you to talk super politely to me or your family, you know? Also, when I'm talking with the guild leader or Mister Benno, I use different words than I do when I'm talking to you, right? Does that make you itchy, too?"

“Now that you say that... nah, I guess not. You talk normally to me, so I guess I never really noticed.”

If you can smoothly switch between modes, it's not something you ever notice. Even if you start out being uncomfortable with it, as you keep using polite speech, you rapidly become used to it.

“So, for the words you're going to be using just at work, why don't you try practicing how Mister Mark speaks? Start with things like addressing people as 'sir' and 'ma'am' and using 'please' and 'thank you' more often... I believe that would best, wouldn't you agree?”

As I switch to more polite phrasing for the last sentence, Lutz nods in comprehension.

“Yeah, sounds good, sir!”

“Argh, no! I'm a girl, say 'ma'am'!” “Snrk! Gaahahahaha!”

Benno, having watched our exchange, erupts in a belly-bursting laugh, slapping the table uproariously, wiping tears from his eyes and clutching his sides.

“Ahaha... well, I have no idea how far you two can get over the winter, but keep at it, kids.”

He shows no sign of calming down, so I peer at him in mild disapproval, though it doesn't seem to do much. I clench my fist tightly, resolving that we're going to make so much progress this winter that he'll be shocked. This jogs my memory, and I remember the favor I wanted to ask of him.

“Ah, that's right! Mister Benno?”

“What's up?” “I'd like a calculator so that I can work on learning how to use it. If I can't practice, I won't be able to really master it.”

Mark is capable of using his calculator very quickly, flicking beads around with his fingers while simultaneously thinking of the next steps. I probably won't be able to get quite as good as him, but for things like abacuses, practice is very important.

“A calculator, hmm... If a secondhand one from my shop is alright with

you, I can sell it for six large copper coins. How does that sound? Can the two of you share one?”

“Yes sir, thank you very much.”

Lutz and I tap our guild cards together with Benno’s, agreeing to pay him three coins each. He then gives us our new calculator.

“We’ll be able to study math with this, Lutz.”

“Yeah,” he replies. “Did you have anything else you wanted to ask?” says Benno.

Something immediately flashes to mind.

“Ah, I’ll need to order a new contract sheet-sized paper frame before springtime, if that’s not too much trouble...”

“Just fill out an order form. Mark already knows what you’re looking for, he can go handle it.” “Huh? But...”

When we’d been going around to various places to place our orders, Mark had told us that if we weren’t there ourselves to describe what we wanted, there’s no telling what kind of trouble we might get ourselves into. I don’t think leaving it all to him is the best idea.

“I’ve got something else I need you to do for me. Hey, just write it down, okay?”

Urged onwards, I draw my ordering set out of my tote bag. By now, I’m down to a single board that I can use for ordering.

“Mister Benno, it seems that I’m running out of boards for order forms...”

“Yeah, you’ve done a lot of ordering, haven’t you. I’ll get you some more.” “Whoa! I’ve almost run out of ink, too!”

Not only have I written a lot of orders, but when we were working on our prototypes, it was necessary for me to use even more ink in order to test how easy it was to write on the paper. I’ve used quite a lot of it by now.

When I say that, Benno’s face tightens sharply. “...I want to charge you

for this, but... well, whatever. I'll call this part of my initial investment."

I'm a little shocked by this. Otto had said that ink was very expensive and thus not a child's plaything. However, I'd never heard how much it actually cost.

Timidly, I ask, "If you'll pardon the digression, might I ask how much a bottle of ink would cost?"

"About four small silver coins each." "Eek?!"

Lutz and I couldn't afford it even if we scraped together everything we've saved so far!

"Use it carefully," he warns me. "Y... yes, sir. Of course!"

I'd been thinking that I wanted some ink of my own to use for my book-making project, but I think I'll have to give up on trying to buy it. Using my leftover soot pencils is probably my best bet.

My pen scratches at the surface of the board as I write out my order. I'm very used to this by now. The tip of the pen quickly dulls, but Lutz immediately sharpens it again for me. I ask Benno to get an average-sized contract for me, use my tape measure to determine its size, and finish writing out the rest of the order.

Benno looks over my completed form, then nods slightly.

"No mistakes or spelling errors at all. I'll get this over to Mark. ...Maine, if you don't get that paper frame and can't make any paper, I'll be in just as much trouble as you. Don't worry about it, I'll make sure it's done right."

"Thank you very much, sir."

I'm relieved to hear Benno say that he'll take responsibility for making sure it'll be made correctly. Breathing out slowly, I tidy up my ordering set.

"...Is that all you wanted to talk about, you two?"

"Yes, sir," I say, nodding emphatically.

Benno sits up straight, his expression going serious. Guessing that this is

going to be a discussion about some sort of transaction, Lutz and I straighten up as well.

“Well then, I’ve got something I’d like to ask as well. Maine, it’s about the hair-washing liquid you taught me how to make.”

“What is it?”

I’d explained how to make it quite a ways back, when we were still in the middle of prototyping our paper, on one of the days where we were borrowing the key for the warehouse. I should have already told him everything. Since I’ve already relinquished all of my rights to it thanks to the contract magic, I have no idea whatsoever about what he could possibly have to ask after all this time. As I study him curiously, my head tilted to the side, his expression grows increasingly troubled as he opens his mouth to speak.

“You told me that melil oil is best oil to use, so I’ve been gathering it until now, but...”

“Huh? Shouldn’t melil be almost out of season? Have you not made anything yet?”

Lutz and I exchange glances. Melil should be about out of season. The two of us had gathered a lot of it already and made it all into simple shampoo. I would have thought that Benno, who is constantly seeking profit, would have started production a long time ago and would have sold a large quantity of it since then.

“Well, I’d acquired a large crop of them, and had a workshop start making it, but the other day they came to me and said that it wasn’t coming out right, even if they made it exactly the way you said. Can you think of any reason that might be?”

I frown as I think about what he said. Fundamentally, the entire procedure boils down to just smashing, then pressing, then mixing in scents. I can’t think of any place in the process that could actually go wrong. I tilt my head to the side in confusion, as does Lutz, who has helped me make shampoo countless times.

“...Even if they’re saying it’s not turning out right, if you’re making simple shampoo, then... it’s not a very difficult process, is it?”

“I know, right?”

I have a ton of ideas on how to make it better, if I only had the ingredients, but in its current simple form, I can’t think of a reason why it would ever fail. It always turned out the same no matter if it was me, Tory, or Lutz who was making it.

“I really didn’t want to bring you out, but if we don’t manage to complete this, then this will turn into something the contract magic would have to deal with. Sorry, but could you come with me to the workshop?”

“Yes, sir!” I reply.

If I recall correctly, the penalties for violating a magical contract are very severe. In the worst case, they could even mean death. As soon as I cutely chirp out my immediate response, though, Lutz grabs hold of my arm.

“Maine, I think you should probably stop for today. Your fever’s only barely just gone back down, and you’re not all the way back to normal, right?”

Lutz is correct, but in this season there’s not going to be a whole lot of time where I’m actually at peak health. This is definitely a season where my fever could flare up at any point, if I’m even just a little bit unprepared. If just not having a fever doesn’t count as being healthy, then I’d never be able to leave my house for anything.

“But I don’t know how long it’ll take me to get totally healthy again, and if we let this go for too long then the snow is going to start falling, so we should go now, while my fever’s down, right?”

“Well, you’re not wrong, but...”

Benno pats Lutz’s worried head reassuringly. “Don’t worry too much, Lutz. I’ll carry her, so we won’t be making her walk. Not like I can stand walking that slowly, anyway.”

“...Well, in that case, I guess it’s okay, huh?”

With that, Benno picks me up once again, and we head out.

He asked me about what could have caused the failure, but I've never actually seen this fail before.

I wonder if he really understood me?

Chapter 44: The Source of the Failure and the Plan To Fix It

“Hey, Maine. About that hair-washing liquid...”

“Yes? What about the ‘simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner’?”

“That name’s too long and hard to say. Is there something else we can call it?”

It certainly is a long name for this world, especially when the people here, like Benno, don’t actually understand the meaning of the underlying Japanese and know it only by sound. So, in other words, he’s asking for a name for this new commodity that would be easier for his noble clientele to pronounce.

I blink, surprised, then nod at him with a smile. “Ohhh, I just called it that on a whim when Tory wanted to know what it was, and it stuck, so I don’t particularly care what we call it?”

“...Is that so?”

At the time, I was so happy that my head was no longer so itchy and that my hair had gone from rustlingly dry to silky smooth that I just called it whatever came to mind. I didn’t really put any thought into it.

“Yes, sir. Please feel free to call it whatever you’d like.”

“You say that, but that just creates new problems...”

Benno frowns, eyebrows drawn together, as he thinks. Naming an entirely new product requires really good instinct, I think. Thinking that he might need a little help, I keep speaking, hoping to give him a little hint.

“We should probably think of this like a brand name. I think it would be best if it were something easy to say and easy to understand. Perhaps instead of finding words that describe what it does, like “hair-washing liquid” or “cleanser”, should we describe the results, like how it makes hair glossy and silky?” “Hmmm... hmmm...”

As I list off ideas, Benno's expression grows even more and more grim. I wonder if, instead of giving hints, I was stressing him out?

Benno's eyebrows are deeply furrowed, but Lutz just shrugs lightly.

"Since I've been saying 'sim-pull ah-rin-won sham-poo und kun-dishner' all this time, I think it's probably fine?"

"Maine," says Benno, "Is there... anything... else you'd call it?"

Having perhaps completely failed to come up with any suitable words, Benno looks down at me, seeking help. Since I've been referring to it as "simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner" this entire time, I can't just arbitrarily come up with some other name for it when prompted. There are similar Japanese words I can use, but that's not going to change the fact that nobody in this world will understand what they mean.

"Ummm? I can't really think of anything, besides something like 'rinse-in shampoo'...?"

"...So 'rin', 'sham', and 'poo' are necessary, huh?" "No, um, not really, but I think whatever you come up with would be much..."

Benno mumbles to himself for a while, but in the end, maybe because he couldn't come up with a name that worked, or maybe because "simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner" is already fixed in his head, or maybe he even just made a decision based on my second suggestion, he decides on just calling it "rinsham".

Uh... is that going to be okay?

When we pass through the central square, Benno turns to walk towards the west. I blink in surprise; I would have thought that, since this is a workshop for pressing oil, it would be on the streets where the other craftsmen are.

"Are there workshops on the west side as well? I thought it would be where the other craftsmen work."

"There's workshops that handle more foodstuffs over there. They have a lot of things coming and going, so being close to the west gate is ideal for

them.” “Ah, right, melil fruit is a foodstuff. I’ve only really been using it to make rinsham, lately...”

When I had been at my wits’ end with how constantly my head was itching and desperately wanting to wash it, I hadn’t considered even for a moment that the simple shampoo I was making would have become a commodity. At the start, I was just thinking about what I could actually use, seeing as how I neither had any seaweed nor could use water after washing rice with it. I searched through my memory for everything I knew about shampoo, recalling various magazines about things like natural lifestyles and naturalism, trying to remember everything I could about using natural ingredients in beauty products.

From my memories, I remembered that you could make a shampoo by using plant-based oils coupled with salt or powdered orange peel to use as a scrub. I also remembered that you could make a facial by whipping egg whites until they’re firm, a lotion out of dried plums and sake, and a whole lot of other things, but I didn’t really need either of those things for a child’s soft skin. The pressing necessity was finding raw materials for a shampoo.

...Although getting the oil was tremendously difficult.

I’d wandered around the kitchen, searching for things that might contain oils, and discovered the somewhat avocado-like melil that had been put out on the kitchen table. I thought that it might have oil in it, but I didn’t at the time know what it was actually called, so I couldn’t go and get more of it, and my head was itchy, so everything was terrible. Since curing my itchy scalp was such a pressing necessity, I constantly begged Tory to go get me more of them, not knowing in the slightest how difficult gathering things from the forest actually was. Thanks to that, my scalp was soothed, and, having brought gloss and silkiness back to my hair, I could focus in earnest on building a more hygienic lifestyle for myself.

Tory, thank you!

The workshop that Benno brings me to is something like a large warehouse. Just as I had heard about workshops that did a lot of work

with foodstuffs, various smells drifted through the air, mingling together. Various workbenches were lined up throughout the workshop, with different benches seemingly set up for different tasks. Along the walls, shelves are set up for storing tools, with all sorts of different implements visible on them.

Benno catches one of the workmen. “Is the master here? Tell him Benno’s come.”

The workman, panicking, lets out a strangled “yes!” and runs off. Benno sets me down, and we wait for the master of the workshop to arrive. Shortly, a slightly plump older man, having been called by the workman from earlier, emerges from further back, his belly swaying as he walks.

At first glance, he’s very much a man in charge of someplace that makes food. He has the physique of a man who, from the bottom of his heart, loves to eat. If this were Japan, he’d only be thought of as a little fat, but in this city where food is not overly abundant, a belly like that is considered to be quite fat indeed.

“Master Benno, thank you so much for walking all the way out here. ... May I ask who these children are?”

“These are the kids that originally figured out how to make rinsham. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

Benno’s eyes sharpen dangerously as he speaks. The workshop master rapidly nods many times in agreement.

“So,” says Benno, “have you fixed the problem?”

“No; we’ve changed the tools we’re using, changed the people making it, and a whole bunch of other things, but I have a feeling that we’re starting to get pretty far off the mark.”

Benno can’t conceal his irritation that no progress was being made. When I see how greatly embarrassed the workshop master is, I suddenly feel like I’m somehow being scolded along with him.

I tug on his sleeve. “Umm, would it be possible for me to see how you’re making this?”

“Sure. ...If you notice anything wrong, it’d be a huge help if you could teach me about it. For some reason, the stuff we’re making here doesn’t actually seem to clean anything.”

He leads us to the corner where they make rinsham, and he shows me their process. Since he doesn’t want to waste any resources on another failure, he uses a single melil fruit. He places a heavy weight on top of the fruit, and crushes it in a single instant. It’s very different than how Tory and Lutz squeeze out oil by using a hammer. Next, the foreman picks up the cloth underneath it, then tightly wrings it out, causing oil to drip into a bowl.

“This is how we make the oil. You with me so far?”

There isn’t a single problem I can see with their oil-extracting process. Lutz mumbles that there’s no room for error there, so there doesn’t seem to be any mistakes, at a glance, with this step of the process.

“The two of us couldn’t use a weight to press the oil,” I say, “so we had to use a hammer. However, I don’t think a difference like that would be enough to cause this kind of error.”

“Ahh, a kid wouldn’t be strong enough for that, so they’d need to use a hammer, huh.”

As the warehouse master mumbles about perhaps trying a hammer next, I make a request.

“That oil. Would it be alright if I take a look at the oil you extracted just now?”

“Sure.”

He hands me the oil bowl. Inside, a clear, green oil, devoid of any impurity, sloshes around.

“Ah! Got it.”

The instant I see the oil, I realize what’s wrong. On one hand, I’m happy that the problem is so simple, but on the other hand, it’s for such a depressing reason that I almost want to cry.

“What?! Were we doing something wrong?!” asks the warehouse master, with such ferocity that I think he might bite my head off. My shoulders drooping a little, I answer. “...It’s the cloth you’re using.”

When I say this, Benno shoots a glare at the warehouse master, whose eyes go wide in shock. Grabbing the cloth in both hands, he brandishes it frantically, flapping it around.

“The cloth?! This is a brand new operation, so we used the best cloth we could get!”

“...That’s the problem.” “What?!”

Now it’s not just the warehouse master who’s staring at me in shop, but Benno as well. Shrugging, I set the bowl of oil down on the table.

“The fabric that the two of us have at our homes is all very coarse. I’m sure you can see from our clothing, but we don’t have a lot of money. Since we don’t have a finely-woven cloth like this, the oil that we make has a lot of plant fibers and tiny fragments of the seeds mixed in with it.”

The oil that Tory and Lutz press isn’t a clear green like this, but whitish and cloudy. The reason is simple. The cloth we’re using is so rough that it can’t even compare to the one they’re using at this workshop. Also, in order to avoid any waste, we press every last drop we can get out of the fruit, and we wring every last drop out of the cloth without caring too much about any impurities.

“Those fragments work as a ‘scrub’... ah, I mean, they are necessary for removing any impurities as you’re washing your hair.”

Essentially, you can take a pure oil like they’ve made at this workshop and add ground salt, nuts, and dried citrus peel in order to make a scrub. However, in our case, the oil itself already worked just fine as a scrub. To make things worse, my lifestyle isn’t one where I can talk about adding more things to it. The best I could do was mix the large quantity of herbs I gathered from the forest in to it to make it smell better.

The workshop master seems befuddled by my explanation, his mouth hanging open. It seems the source of the problem was vastly outside his

expectations. It wasn't what I was expecting, either. For the final product to deviate so much from the sample just because of the decision to use good-quality oil... I bet he's sick to his stomach.

Benno, having understood the source of the problem, lets out a sigh of relief. He picks up the squeezing cloth with his fingertips, then shrugs.

"Never would have thought it was the cloth. For something to fail just because we're using a high quality thing... I'd thought that there was some sort of trick to mixing the herbs in."

"The herbs are basically just there for the scent."

The warehouse master breathes an enormous sigh of relief. With an expression that's somewhere between relieved and troubled, he whispers to himself.

"If we need a rougher cloth, the stuff we've pressed so far is useless, huh..."

"Um?" I say. "You can use it, you know? It would be a waste if you didn't." "Eh?"

If I could, a pure, high-quality oil like this would actually be what I'd want to use. If you added a scrub to this, then you'd wind up with a product of much higher quality than the rinsham that I was making.

"All you need to do is add a 'scrub' to the oil you've got so far. If you pick your ingredients carefully, you could make something much higher quality than what I made."

"Oh," says the warehouse master, impressed. "Young lady, you're quite knowledgeable, aren't you?"

As the warehouse master looks at me praisingly, I notice that Benno's eyes are suddenly gleaming with a terrifying light, like he's just spotted fresh prey.

"Um..."

Shit. I got carried away and said too much. All the blood drains from my face. I glance over at Lutz, who is staring at me with an expression so

amazed that he doesn't even have to say what a huge idiot I am. This is exactly what happened when I accidentally let too much information slip to him, earlier.

Aaaaaaargh! I'm a colossal idiot! Am I even capable of learning?!

The corners of my mouth twitch slowly into place as I try to paste a smile onto my face.

Calm down, calm down, I still haven't leaked anything, everything's just fine.

"If you add anything rough to the mixture, there's a chance it could injure someone's scalp when they're washing, so please be careful about that."

Smiling, I try to make a quick escape, but Benno clamps down hard on my shoulder, a ferocious grin on his face.

"It looks like you know about quite a lot of other things, don't you?"

I do know a lot more, but I cannot let myself say anything else lest something slip out. From now on, I want to live a calm, tranquil life here, so Benno having strange suspicions about me would be very problematic. Somehow, I have to escape from Benno's interrogation.

Since Benno didn't know the previous Maine, he won't have the same sort of mistrust that Lutz did, so the conditions are different this time. If I try hard enough, I think I should be able to manage. I'll show him somehow.

Although my back grows cold with sweat, I refuse to be dominated by the force of Benno's gaze. I brace my legs, put on my best smile, and bluff as hard as I ever have.

"I'll have to charge for anything more. I'll need an information fee. That's all I'll say for now."

"How much?"

Benno smiles broadly, raising his chin a bit, telling me to name my price, but no matter how much he might offer I have no intent on telling him

any more. However, if I say that out loud, then negotiations would be over immediately. Right now, I need to figure out how to get Benno to withdraw.

My heart pounding furiously in my ears, I frantically shake my head.

“...You have a product you can sell already; if you want more, how much are you willing to spend to purchase that information?”

I smile sweetly at him, and we lock eyes for a little while. The sheer ferocity in his reddish-brown eyes makes me instinctively want to back down, but there is no way I can give in. I know that no matter what I say, people look at me funny, but I can't say anything more right now.

Benno breaks eye contact, calling out to the warehouse master.

“Can we borrow your negotiation room?”

“Y... yeah, go right ahead.”

The instant the warehouse master replies, Benno grabs hold of me tightly, picks me up, and literally abducts me towards the negotiation room.

“Aaaaaah?!”

“Maine?!” “We're just going to talk! Nobody come in!”

Lutz staggers as Benno roars, freezing in place. The workshop master nods rapidly in agreement as well.

Benno, having forcefully taken over someone else's negotiation room, sits me down on a chair, then sits facing me. After staring at me for a little while, he opens his mouth.

“Two small gold coins.”

“...what?”

I misheard. I have to have misheard. I'm pretty sure I just heard him offer a tremendous sum, but I definitely have to have misheard.

I notice that my jaw has fallen open in shock, but since I've obviously just misheard, I frantically compose myself, snapping it shut. When I do

so, Benno repeats himself, enunciating very clearly.

“I’ll pay two small gold coins. Tell me about any improvements, changes, alternate plants, absolutely everything that you can think of. All of it.”

If he’s willing to pay two small gold coins for improvements and changes, I have to wonder just how much he’s estimating that he’ll be able to sell rinsham for. If it’s a luxury good like Freida’s hairpins, is he planning on massively overpricing that too when he sells it to his noble counterparts?

“...Mister Benno, just how much are you planning on selling rinsham for?”

As I stare back at him, Benno’s eyes narrow slightly.

“That’s none of your business,” he scoffs. “But I’m trying to sell you information about how to manufacture it, so it is literally my business, isn’t it?”

Convinced that saying that will end the discussion immediately, I breathe a sigh of relief in my heart, and put my hands on the table as I prepare to stand up.

“Three small gold coins. Not a copper more.”

Benno firmly grabs my hands as soon as I put them on the table, and with a pained expression, raises his price. The eyeball-popping sum of money makes my heart waver, but if he’s unwilling to raise the price any further then negotiations are obviously over. For the sake of my peaceful future, I need to dodge any further investigation.

“I must ref...”

“Take it and save it. The only thing that can help with the devouring is money.”

Just as I was about to decline, Benno suddenly stares at me intently, clenching his jaw and speaking in almost a whisper. My eyes go wide in astonishment.

“...Mister Benno, do you know about... the devouring?”

“I thought there was a chance, so the other day I had that old bastard tell me everything he knew.” “Huh?”

When Benno says “that old bastard”, he means the guild leader. I wonder what the guild leader told him? Does this have anything to do with the fact that he was a lot less wary around him after we delivered Freida’s hairpins?

With a different sort of impatience than before coiling around my heart, the strength leaves my body. Having been halfway out of my seat, my butt lands hard on the wooden chair.

Seeing that I’ve sat back down, Benno leans low over the table, bringing his face close to mine, then starts speaking in a voice so low that only I can hear. Strangely, despite the fact that he’s whispering, his voice strikes my eardrum with perfect clarity.

“His granddaughter had the devouring too, same as you, but between his money and his connections to the nobility, she was saved. Sell me the information you have and save the money so that you’ll be ready when the day comes.”

“And by that you mean...” “When the fever in your body... can’t be kept in check anymore.”

Comprehension floods through my body. I had been kind of thinking that the devouring fever was a little more active lately, but I thought it was just my imagination, or that it was because of my physical condition. So, Benno and the guild leader think that someday the devouring fever is going to spread out so wide that I won’t be able to force it back down, huh?

When comparing my own life to the risk of being found to be disturbing after giving up this information, the conclusion comes far too quickly.

I still don’t want to die.

I finally made some paper. I’ve finally managed to create an environment where I can make a book this winter, though it’ll be made out of failed scraps. I’ve gotten used to this lifestyle, and I’ve started

getting along really well with my family. I've started to discover ways that I can be even just a little useful, despite being so useless all around.

I've finally started to enjoy living here.

I can't die now.

Simultaneously, I consider what would happen if I gave Benno this information and he decided he found me disturbing.

If Benno thinks I'm disturbing, what would happen? Unlike Lutz, who knew the previous Maine, all Benno would think is that I'm a child that knows a disturbing amount of strange information. I don't think that being disturbing is enough of a reason to have me killed, and since he isn't tied closely to my family like Lutz is, if he tells them that I'm creepy, it won't actually be that damaging.

In the worst case, he distances himself from me and Lutz, and the two of us can no longer become apprentices at his shop. However, in that case, we could take the guild leader and Freida's offers instead. It's not like we'd have nowhere to go if Benno casts us out.

If having enough money means I can live, then I want to live.

"...Understood," I say, looking up at him. "Three small gold coins it is."

He nods slightly, releasing my hands. Then, after we touch our guild cards together, he arbitrarily grabs my tote bag and yanks out my ordering set.

"Hey, that's my bag!"

"And these are my things." "I mean, you're right, but please at least excuse yourself first!" "Ah, excuse me," he says, in a tone of voice that makes me think he's not actually the slightest bit sorry.

Taking pen and ink in hand, he gets an order form ready to use as a notepad.

"Well then, how about you start telling me? Let's start with how you think we can sell the failing oil from before."

"You need to add some sort of 'scrub' in order to loosen the dirt. There

are a lot of different things you could use as a 'scrub', but I think the best thing to use would be salt. If you grind salt into a fine enough powder, it will not only clean off any dirt but should also serve as a deodorant.” “Salt, you say?”

In my memories of what I'd read, the simplest solution would be to take a vegetable oil, then mix it with finely-powdered salt. Benno's eyes widen, perhaps because he wasn't very familiar with salt and was a little surprised.

“...Then, if you add dried 'citrus', I mean, ummm, feriginne peel, ground up very fine, then it'll clean and smell much better than if you didn't add anything else.”

“Feriginne peel, okay. Anything else?”

He glances up at me, pen still clacking on the board as he writes.

“Anything else? Mixing in tiny pieces of 'nuts' ...argh, nüst would be good, I think. I haven't been able to do any of these, though, my family really doesn't want me to waste anything,” I say, with a small laugh.

Benno stares at me pointedly, like he's just heard a particularly interesting piece of information.

“You haven't done any of these, but you still know them? ...Maine, who are you?”

“That's a secret. Small gold coins won't buy that.”

Benno twists his mouth, looking like he swallowed a bug. Sitting in front of him is a person he doesn't himself understand. Under his suspicious gaze, my heart suddenly starts pounding again. The longer this goes on, the less composed I become. I'm not strong at all.

I paste a smile onto my face, then make a gamble that could overturn everything I've worked for.

“You'd fire a creepy kid like me, wouldn't you?”

“Wh-?!” “I was ready for something like this, giving you that information, you know?”

Benno looks down at the table, noisily scratching at his head, then lets out an enormous sigh. He shakes his head back and forth slowly, then looks up at me.

“No, if I thought I could make money off of her, I wouldn’t want her getting snatched up by someone else, so I’d keep her locked up as tightly as I could. I’m a merchant, after all.”

Chapter 45: Tronbay Appears

“Maine, are you feeling alright today?”

“Hmm? No worse than usual? What’s up, Daddy?”

I wonder if he saw me squirming around under the covers and guessed that I’d come down with something? I abruptly hop out of bed, earning a worried frown from my father.

“Otto wants to meet with you to discuss this winter’s work, so he asked me if you’d come to the gate when the weather was clear and you’re feeling all right.”

“Oh! I don’t have a fever today, and I don’t have anything arranged with Mister Benno either, so I’ll go to the gate today.”

The gates open at the second bell, so when it draws near, I wave goodbye to my father as he heads off to work. Then, quickly, I change my clothes, right there on top of the bed.

“Mommy, Tory. I’m gonna go to the gate today.”

“Oh yeah,” says Tory. “There’s not that much stuff left in the forest to gather anymore. Mom, it’s better for Maine to stop going to the forest now, right?” “You’re absolutely right,” replies my mother. “If she gets a fever and faints again she’d be in big trouble, so it’s for the best that she doesn’t go to the forest with just the other kids anymore.”

Lately, the weather has gotten very chilly, and the season where it’s easiest to catch a cold has come around. Lately, there are more and more days where even I can recognize that my physical condition isn’t particularly good. If I keep pushing hard, I’ll only be a burden to everyone around me, so I should take care of myself and stay out of the forest.

“Hey, Maine!” calls Lutz as I head down the stairs carrying only my tote bag. “You going to the gate today?”

In order to make sure I don’t catch a cold, I’ve been dressed in a ton of layers of clothing. Unlike me, the other children look comparatively nimble, since being bundled up like I am makes it rather difficult to move.

There isn't very much time left before the snow starts to fall, so today's the last spurt of activity towards gathering firewood.

I walk along with the other children as they head towards the gates. Lately, I've been able to walk fast enough that I don't get separated from the rest of the children anymore. Every time I try to push a little harder, though, Lutz shoots me down with a stern warning.

"Right, so we'll stop by here on our way back, so wait here, okay?"

"Okay! Good luck with your gathering, Lutz!"

I wave farewell from the gates as the others continue on towards the forest. I don't see my father anywhere, but I find one of the younger gatekeepers I've made acquaintances with and have him let me into the night duty room.

"Mister Otto, are you here? It's Maine!"

As I open the door and step inside, I see that the shelves along the walls are packed full of thin wooden boards for the budget estimations.

"Hey, Maine! Thanks for coming out."

"Hello, Mister Otto, it's been a while."

After we exchange crisp salutes, he ushers me to the chair closest to the fire. It's a little on the tall side, so I have to halfway climb up onto it, but once I'm settled, I pull my slate and slate pencils out of my bag.

"How often do you think you'll be able to make it out here this winter?" he asks. "Ummm, I talked it over with my father, but we decided that I could come on days when I'm feeling well, the snow isn't too bad to walk in, and my father is working either the morning or day shift."

First of all, there aren't very many days during the winter where I'm feeling very well. Since I'm at least a little bit stronger this year than last, I really hope that the number of times I catch a cold and wind up stuck in bed are both rare and brief, but I have no way to really predict how often it will actually be.

Next is the weather. There aren't very many days during the winter

where there isn't a snowstorm, either. On sparkingly clear days, there's nothing to worry about. My father says there's nothing to worry about on days when the snowfall is light, but once it actually starts drifting from the sky I think he'll stop me.

And, finally, my father will be on the night shift for basically a third of the winter in total.

"Most likely," I continue, "I'll barely need two hands to count the number of days I'll be able to come out here, I think."

"...Well, I'd guessed as much, but really, you only helped me out for one day last year and it was still a huge help, so I've really got my hopes up for this year, too. I'll be very glad for your help no matter how often you can come." "Thanks!"

It's a good thing that I'll be able to earn a bunch of slate pencils by just doing calculation work. Since this year I'll be helping with Lutz's education, we'll need a lot more slate pencils than I did last year, so I plan on working as hard as I can.

"Ah! When I'm working on the estimations, you'll be providing the slate pencils I'm using, not me, right?"

"Heh... hahaha! Well, aren't you thinking like a merchant now? Of course the slate pencils are part of the cost. Don't worry about it, just calculate."

After I suddenly remembered the question I needed to ask, Otto's eyes went round for a moment before he burst into laughter. I may be getting laughed at, but at least now I can do my work without any doubts. I roll up my sleeves a little so that I won't accidentally rub out any numbers, then pick up my slate pencil.

"All set," I say. "Right, here's today's work."

Otto brings over an enormous pile of wooden boards and drops them on the table with a clatter. These are the tallies of the furnishings and equipment used by the higher-ups at their duty station. It seems like Otto is in charge of doing the accounting for this entire post. Hanging his head,

he tells me that he'd brought this on himself by pointing out a mistake in one of his superiors' calculations.

I start working on totaling up the sums, triple-checking my work to make sure that I don't make any mistakes, either.

"Otto, you here?! Come out, it's an emergency!"

A soldier bursts into the room, looking frantic. Otto quickly jots a line down on his sheet to mark his place, then dashes out of the room, telling me over his shoulder not to let anyone touch his calculator.

It seems that, for some reason, the entire guard contingent at the gate has been called to action. From the corridor on the other side of the door, I can hear the rush of countless footsteps, amplified to a roar by echoes off the stone pavement. In this enormous commotion, there's nobody outside that I could ask what's happening right now.

I've been to the gate countless times to help out, but this is the first time I've seen it be this ridiculously noisy. Left all by myself in this room, I feel thick, cold anxiety slowly oozing into my heart.

Is it... okay, for me to be here?

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. As I look around the empty room I've been left alone in, I suddenly feel the lurch of vertigo. My fever, refusing to overlook even the tiniest lapse in my concentration, suddenly thrashes about within me, as if it's pointing out the weakness in my heart. Recalling my life's irritations, I send my will through my body, forcing the fever back into the depths of my heart, imagining screwing a lid shut on it so tightly that it cannot escape.

"...Whoof, I'm tired."

After struggling so hard against the devouring, my anxiety about what's happening outside has dramatically decreased. I sit back down to resume my calculations, but Otto immediately comes back into the room. He quickly finishes up the calculations he'd finished thus far, and starts tidying up his share of the paperwork.

"It looks like a bunch of tronbay has appeared in the forest. The kids

came running for help, so more than half of the gate guard headed out to deal with it. I've got to go stand by the gate, but, Maine, can you stay here and keep working? Also, if any letters of introduction show up, I'll direct them here, so please take care of them for me."

"Right, understood."

With the cause of the disturbance identified, I feel a little bit better, and I get back to tackling the remaining work. Now that I think about it, Lutz had mentioned that tronbay started coming around in the fall. I wonder, maybe we can get some tronbay for ourselves.

Hm? Although, it looks like the soldiers will be participating as well, so maybe it's grown too much by now, to the point that we won't be able to use it for paper? I wonder...

Last time, it was possible for the children to cut it down by themselves, so I turn back to my calculations, thinking that it's not something anybody should be quite so worried about. After a while, though, I once again hear the clamor of people talking though the closed door.

"Maine," says Otto, "Lutz has come back. He says he has something he wants to discuss with you and would like for you to return home with him. What do you think?"

"If he cut down any tronbay, I think that's what he'll want to talk with me about, so I'll go home. I've finished the calculations from here to here." "Thanks, Maine, you're a great help."

By the gate, I can see soldiers and children alike milling about, seeming to have just returned from the forest and carrying bundles of raw tronbay. As I scan the crowd, looking for Lutz, my father rushes up to me, a chunk of wood as big as I am hoisted up on his shoulder.

"Maine! Look at the size of this tronbay that your daddy cut down!"

"Whooa, that's big! Is that gonna be firewood?" "No, tronbay doesn't burn very easily, so we won't do that. I'm going to make furniture out of it instead. When there's big house fires, things made of tronbay sometimes don't burn up, so it's used for making things you put your valuables in." "...

Huh, I didn't know that. That's really cool!"

As expected of such a mysterious plant. To not burn up, even in a huge fire... that's not even wood, anymore!

As I let out an astonished breath at this new surprise, I notice Lutz standing behind my father, beckoning me closer.

"What's up, Lutz?" I ask. "Heh, Lutz," says my father, looking down at the basket on Lutz's back, "were those skinny sticks all you could manage to cut down?"

He puffs out his chest proudly, like he's just won a competition. I'd really like him to stop competing against children. It's embarrassing. I let out a long, exasperated sigh, but I can see a lot of the other soldiers and children nearby comparing the size of the trees and branches they cut down, since it's so difficult to cut down once it matures.

"There's not really any use for thin branches like that," says one.

Since tronbay hard to burn, you can't use sticks like that as firewood, and such young, soft wood couldn't hold back the heat of a blaze, so it can't be used as furniture, either.

"These sticks are uuuuseless!" says another child. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him angrily chuck the pile of slender branches he was caring to the ground with a clatter.

"Ah, those are perfect for me," I say.

Even if that child doesn't need them, they're perfect materials for making high-grade paper. It would be an enormous waste to throw away such slender, soft wood.

"You really don't need them?" I ask. "...N... no!"

Suddenly noticing how many people were staring at him, the boy runs off, shouting at me over his shoulder. As I gather up the pile of sticks he discarded, other children come up to me, offering me similarly slender tronbay cuttings out of their own baskets.

"Hey, take these too. All I'd get if I brought these home is my dad mad at

me.”

“I’ll give these to you. I don’t need them.”

Shortly, a huge quantity of sticks has been piled up around me.

“Lutz, I’ve... got a lot of wood here.”

“...Yep.”

Lutz and I set to neatly organizing the pile of branches into neat stacks, then cramming Lutz’s basket as full as it can get. My father, dumbfounded by this turn of events, looks back and forth between me, Lutz, and the overstuffed basket, a troubled scowl on his face.

“...Hey, Maine. What are you going to do with all that?”

“We use young, soft wood to use, so this is good. Lutz, let’s go?”

I turn my back on my father and walk away. Lutz follows, scratching his head, looking a little troubled himself.

“When I was cutting the tronbay down, I was thinking we could use it as raw materials too, but... we have to actually use it within like five to seven days, right, otherwise it doesn’t work?”

“Yeah, that’s right, what’s wrong?” “...What do we do now? I really don’t want to go stand in the river during this season, and we don’t have enough extra firewood to steam this stuff for over a bell... do we give up?”

I’m well aware that in this season, even if you were to go to the forest, you wouldn’t find very much in the way of firewood, but I’m also certain that if we let all this tronbay go to waste for such a reason, Benno would be so indignant that his eyes might pop out of his skull.

“...I understand what you’re saying, but maybe we should go talk to Mister Benno first?”

“Yeah, I guess he’d get real mad if we just threw it away on our own.” He lets out a long sigh. “Man... I reeeally don’t want to go stand in the river when it’s this cold out.”

We plod our way towards Benno’s shop, but, as one might expect, the

watchman outside tells Lutz that he can't let him in looking like he just came back from gathering sticks in the forest, so he'll have to stay outside. At the watchman's call, Mark comes out from within the store and escorts me inside. A customer is just leaving Benno's office when I enter the store. As we pass each other, he looks down at me, notes my mismatched appearance, and snorts disdainfully.

I really should order those clothes sooner rather than later. I don't want to lessen the dignity of Benno's shop just by being here. I need to keep saving as much money as I can.

Benno looks mildly surprised when I'm shown into his office.

"What is it? We didn't have a meeting scheduled today, right?"

"We didn't have anything scheduled, no, but I needed to talk to you... to be frank, tronbay showed up in the forest today."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Benno stands up so suddenly that his chair clunks behind him. He leans forward excitedly across his desk.

"Did you say tronbay?! Did you cut it down?!"

"Yes, sir, we were able to get quite a lot of it. It's just, well..." "What is it?" "Making it into paper is... hard." "Why?"

He frowns dubiously at me, not seeming to understand. I open my mouth to reply, guessing that he's absolutely about to get angry.

"Ummm, well, we, we need to steam the wood for a bell's worth of time, which we don't have enough firewood for, and then we..."

"You imbecile!"

I was about to say that we couldn't soak it in the river like we need to, but before I could finish listing all of our reasons, Benno impatiently cut me off, yelling in a voice like the crash of thunder.

"You can buy firewood literally any time of the year! You can't possibly have thought of comparing it to tronbay, which is exceedingly rare! And don't even try to tell me that you can't do that cost/benefit math!"

"...That's what I thought you were going to say. Since I'd like to buy

firewood, may I ask Mister Mark to take me to the lumberyard?"

Since there is no way that anyone could possibly mistake me for a child who has already had her baptism, if I were to walk up to a store and ask for some firewood they'd probably just look at me suspiciously and shoo me away.

"...Where's Lutz?"

"Waiting outside, sir. We came here immediately after he returned from the forest, so he's not really presentable enough to enter the shop..."

As I speak, Benno rings the small bell on his desk, summoning Mark.

"Mark, please go ask Lutz if Maine is okay to walk to the lumberyard today."

"Certainly, sir." "Maine, write up your order form here," he says, tapping on the desk. I shake my head. "Ummm, since all I had planned to do today was go to the gate, I don't have any of my ordering forms with me." "...I have some here."

Benno produces a thin wooden board and some ink, and I start writing out my order there on the spot.

"Mister Benno, I just want enough firewood to burn for one bell's worth of time; what should I write?"

"Just write it like that. I'll probably be able to sell off any surplus." "Yes, sir," I reply.

As I write, Mark returns with Lutz's answers.

"It seems that it would be better for Maine to not do any more walking than she has already. When you've finished writing up the order, he and I will head for the lumberyard ourselves."

"Thank you very much," I reply.

After I hand him the finished order form and see him off, Benno hands me a stack of several wooden sheets.

"Read these when you have some time."

“Gladly!”

On these wooden sheets is more knowledge that could be called common knowledge for merchants: information about how contracts work. I hum happily to myself, overjoyed to be reading, but as I continue to skim, questions start steadily popping up inside my head.

“Mister Benno, will this firewood purchase be treated as part of the initial investment?”

“.....”

Benno soundlessly turns to fix his gaze directly on me, giving no answer.

“Also, I’ve been thinking that this was kind of strange, but the other day when we delivered the prototype you said that that was the end of what you’d call initial investment, right? But, unless I’m mistaken, didn’t the magical contract state that it would last until our baptismal ceremonies? Are you not planning on covering the cost of the larger paper frame as part of the initial investment?”

If I had to think about why Benno would specifically have me read about contracts, the only thing that comes to mind is the subject of our contract magic.

“...Tch, you noticed?”

“Why would you try to cheat me?!” “I wasn’t really trying to cheat you. That was a test, to see whether or not you two could remember the contents of a contract you’ve signed. I wanted to see how you’d respond if you caught your partner in violation of the contract. Since you hadn’t said anything, I was wondering if you’d forgotten.”

He snorts dismissively, drumming his fingers on the top of his desk as he stares fixedly at me. After a brief moment of speechlessness, I lock eyes with him seriously.

“When you said that the initial investments were finished after we’d completed our prototypes, I thought to myself, ‘oh, I guess that’s what it was’. I never thought that you would try to cheat us, Mister Benno, and since the contract magic burned up the original written copy I had no way

to check the terms for myself.”

He snorts again, his lips creeping up into a sneer.

“If the original contract got burned,” he replies, shrugging, “then you should have either written down a copy elsewhere or completely memorized it. You’re too naive.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

He’s not at all wrong. If you don’t get a copy of a contract, then it’s your job to either copy it down somewhere yourself or commit it to memory. I was just foolishly leaning on the fact that I was told the penalties for breaking a magical contract were severe.

“Now that you’ve pointed that out, then, yeah, I’ll pay for the rest of the initial purchase.”

“You say you’ll pay for it now, but don’t we have a contract that says you needed to pay for it anyway? Wouldn’t that have been a breach of contract?”

I frown at him, lips pursed tightly together. Benno, however, smiles triumphantly, looking at me with a face full of joy.

“If I’d said that I wouldn’t, that would have been a violation. This one was your fault for not doing more research. If you asked me for something, I’d pay for it and, since I paid, there wouldn’t be a violation. If you’re going to be a merchant, you have to remember these things.”

“...Urgh...” His smirk grows only smugger when he sees how vexed I am. “If you’d read through all that information on contracts and still hadn’t noticed, I was planning on taking advantage of it even harder,” he laughs.

Since Benno so kindly gave me a hint so that I’d realize what was happening, I’m going to be optimistic about this and look at it as him trying to give me valuable training towards being a merchant... but vexing things are still so vexing.

Determined not to be fooled again, I go over the sheets again, paying much closer attention this time. When I’m in the middle, though, Benno

suddenly stops working and calls out to me.

“Ah, that’s right. Maine, can you accelerate the schedule on your winter handiwork?”

“My family’s already done with preparing for the winter, more-or-less, so I think that it might be possible, if we needed to?”

The amount of time it takes for my family to complete our winter preparations is largely determined by my father’s work schedule. Although every soldier at the gate needs to prepare for the winter, there’s no way that they can all simultaneously take leave of their posts to go do so, so they take turns taking days off in order to spread the workload. Last year, my father’s days off were very late in the season, so we were only just barely able to get things finished in time for the first snowfall, but this year we’ve finished with comparatively plenty of time to spare.

“Do you think you could make about, say, ten or twenty hairpins of different colors? The guild master’s granddaughter has been bragging about hers, so I’ve had a lot of enquiries about them. ...Including several that I can not turn down.”

“I thought Frieda wanted to stand out by having the only one at the winter baptismal ceremony? Wouldn’t doing this make hers less special?”

I tilt my head doubtfully to the side. Is it really okay to do this when the entire reason we overcharged her so much was because it was going to be special, I wonder?

Benno’s eyes falter, just the tiniest bit. “...Hers are going to be the only ones that match her perfectly. The rest of them are going to be off the shelf, so that’ll make hers just stand out even more. There’s no problem.”

“If there’s no problem, then that’s fine with me, but if you need these to be finished in a hurry, are you willing to pay for expedited service?”

He seems momentarily dumbfounded that I just demanded extra money from him. I smile sweetly back.

“Whenever and wherever you can take money, take it, it’s something to be taken,” I recite. “Right? I’m studying under you, Mister Benno, trying to

be a merchant like you are.”

I chuckle to myself as Benno makes an unreasonably disgusted expression, his entire face pulling taut.

“Ten medium copper coins per hairpin. That’s double what it was before, so there’s no problems there, right?”

“That simply won’t do. I must ask for either eleven or thirteen medium copper coins, if you would. I must consider the share of the profit that Lutz and I have previously agreed on with respect to the differences between the flower and the pin portions. If I don’t, it would be very inconvenient for me.”

We had previously told our families that the flower portions were worth two coins and the pins were worth one. Since Lutz and I are to split the remaining coin evenly, having an odd number of coins left to split would be, honestly, a bother.

“Can’t be helped. Eleven it is. You’re getting good at this,” he says, ruefully. “I am quite humbly delighted to be praised for such a small thing, sir.”

“...Really, where did you learn to talk like that?” he murmurs, halfway between amazed and amused, and shrugs his shoulders.

“Ah, also,” I say, “I’d like one coin per hairpin I have to make right now. I’d prefer if this was prepayment, but if you need to take it out of my savings, that would be fine, too...”

“Alright, I don’t mind paying you in advance, but what’s this for?” “To weave a spell of urgency,” I reply.

If I need to make ten of these before the snow starts to fall, then I need to enlist the cooperation of Tory and my mother and, in order to do that, I need to give them some motivation. My mother, in particular, has been doing winter handiwork for many years now, and knows just how large the payment I’m promising for each of these is, compared to other things she’s done. So, she has some doubts, somewhere: either we’re being deceived somehow, or even if we do make these we won’t get paid. If I can

actually give them money for each of these they make, money that they can use right now for additional provisions, then not only can I earn their trust, but I can also boost their motivation as well.

A knock comes at the door, and Mark reenters the room.

“I’ve returned,” he says. “The firewood you ordered will arrive here by the time the gates close. Someone from the shop will deliver it to you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you very much,” I reply. “Now then, it’s very cold outside, so please take care.”

After Mark ushers me out of the shop, I see Lutz standing to the side, the basket on his back conspicuously empty. It seems that on the way to the lumberyard they stopped by the warehouse so that he could deposit the tronbay there. Ah, of course, no wonder that he wouldn’t have wanted to bring me along.

We walk slowly home, through streets that rapidly darken as the sun grows dim behind the horizon. It really is cold, so I want to hurry home as quickly as possible, but if I run as fast as my instincts tell me, it’s absolutely certain that I’ll get sick again.

As we plod onwards, I discuss with Lutz the plan for accelerating the schedule on our winter handiwork, telling him about how I secured an expedited delivery fee and my plans for getting my family to help so we can make it on time. Lutz nods once, then scrunches his eyebrows in concern.

“So, I’m not worried so much about what’s going to happen if I can’t get my family to help and I have to do everything by myself. It’s the tronbay I’m worried about.”

“The tronbay?”

I tilt my head to the side concernedly. Lutz lets out a huge sigh, his shoulders drooping.

“...Hey, Maine. You’ve been told you can’t go to the forest anymore, so is there actually any way we can still prepare the tronbay? Am I really going

to have to do it all by myself?”

“This time I think we can do it all in front of the warehouse, so I can help you there. Although, we’d have to be outside for at least a bell, so I don’t know what my family would say about that...”

There’s no way I can actually leave the town’s gates, but if we’re talking about doing something like going to Benno’s shop, the trip itself isn’t particularly difficult. The exposure to the cold, however, is the difficult part. If I’m outside for a long period of time, the chances of me getting sick are strikingly high.

“The warehouse... you mean we don’t have to go to the river?!”

His eyes have gone very round with shock. However, even if you think about it, asking him to carry the pot, the steamer, and the firewood to the forest all by himself would be completely unreasonable.

“Before, we were getting both our raw materials and the firewood out in the forest, so it was more efficient for us to do our work out there too, but this time, we already have the tronbay and the firewood here in the workshop, right? We don’t specifically need to go out to the forest for this, so we’d be overdoing it if we dragged everything all the way out there.”

“Ah, really? I was going to have to lug all of that stuff...”

It seems like he was so worried about the fact that he was going to have to work alone that he hadn’t even thought about the sheer quantity of stuff he was going to have to carry out to the forest.

“We won’t have river water to immediately dunk the wood into after it’s steamed, but the reason we do that is so that we can expose it to cold water in order to make it easier to peel the bark off. The water in the well should be more than cold enough this time of year. We’ll need to draw water from the well several times in order to make sure that the water we’re soaking the wood in doesn’t get lukewarm, but that’s way easier than going to the forest, right?”

However, Lutz’s face grows even more gloomy. There’s no way I could have allayed all his concerns in at once.

“That’s... easier, but... what about after that? How are we going to preserve the bark?”

“If we could get all the way to preserving the white bark, that would be great, but it’s not like it’s impossible to preserve the black bark either. It might make stripping it off a little more difficult later, but in this weather me going to the forest is dangerous, and you even thinking about going into the river is suicidal, so let’s stop there.” “Alright!”

With the final cause of his worries dispelled, Lutz looks ahead, face shining. He broadens his gait just a little bit as we walk, constantly repeating things like “oh man, I’m so happy, this is a huge relief”.

When we get home, I’m going to need to ask Tory and my mother for help with the handiwork... and then we’re steaming the wood tomorrow, huh...?

As I continue to plan out what I need to do after this, my thoughts begin to drift gradually off course, perhaps because I’m really hungry.

...And now that we have a steamer, I really want to eat some piping hot steamed sweet potato, ooh, or some fluffy buttery mashed potatoes. We don’t have any sweet potato equivalent, but I’m pretty sure I can get a tuber around here that’s enough like a potato. I’ll get the potatoes, and Lutz can get the butter, so tomorrow we can have mashed potatoes, right? Aaah, that’ll be so good! Mashed potatoes are great for warming up both your body and your soul. Yep, that’s settled.

At some point, while I’m lost in my imagination, we arrive at the water well in front of our houses. Lutz stops walking and turns to look at me.

“Maine, I’ll go get the warehouse key from the shop, and then when the firewood arrives I’ll come and get you. Wait at home until then, okay?”

“Got it. Remember to get the butter, too!”

I give him a huge wave, then disappear into my building. As I climb the stairs, I can hear Lutz’s stunned voice echo in through the windows.

“Eh? What?! Butter?! What butter?! What do we need butter for?!”

Chapter 46: We Made It At Once

Now that my father's gone into the bedroom and started getting himself ready for bed, I jump right onto the topic of winter handiwork.

"So, today, Mister Benno told me that the hairpins we made for Freida were getting really famous, and there's a lot of people wanting to buy them, so he wanted to know if we could maybe get some of our winter handiwork done early. He says he wants more like Tory's hairpin."

"...Well, it's not like we can't, but..."

Tory and my mother exchange a glance, then frown doubtfully at me. The rest of that sentence is clearly written on their faces: it's not like they can't, but it would be way too much work to accelerate production enough. Their reaction is exactly what I expected, so I go fetch my tote bag and pull out the proof: two medium-copper coins, which jingle as I set them down on the table.

"It's just a little bit, but I was able to get him to let me hold onto some money in advance, so if you can get one done, I can pay you for it!"

In the next instant, the two of them abruptly stand up, their chairs clattering behind them, and move to the part of the table closest to the stove, where it's just a little bit brighter.

"Uh? What?"

I've suddenly been left behind, sitting dumfounded in my chair like an empty-headed fool. Meanwhile, Tory has dug out enough slender needles for the three of us, and my mother has disappeared into the storeroom to fetch the basket full of thread. I'm a little overwhelmed by how perfectly in sync the two of them are, but I hop down from my chair and pull it over to the table. As it clatters along the floor behind me, my mother calls out to me.

"Maine, do you have a sample we can base this off of?"

"Um? It's just like Tory's, I think?"

Reacting instantly to my words, Tory immediately spins around and

heads to get her hairpin out of her wooden storage box. Thanks to her rustling about in the bedroom as she searches for her hairpin, I can hear my father groggily speak up.

“What’s happening? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Gunther,” replies my mother, calling to him from the kitchen. “Good night!”

By the time I’ve gotten my chair over the table and climbed up onto it, the preparations for our handiwork have been completed.

“Maine,” asks my mother, “what colors should we use?”

She rummages around within the basket of threads, but I haven’t actually told her what colors to use yet. All I’ve said so far is that the design needs to be like Tory’s hairpin.

“We don’t know what the customers’ hair color or favorite colors are, so Mister Benno told me that he wants ones with lots of different colors. Let’s do these like Tory’s and pick three colors, and make the same number of flowers.”

“Got it. How about white, yellow, and red?” “I think that’ll be cute!”

The instant the words leave my mouth, my mother starts knitting ferociously. Since she helped make Tory’s hairpin last winter, she already knows how to do it, and now she’s working so very, very quickly. In the approximately fifteen minutes it takes me to knit one flower, she’s churned out five. Soon, we’ve knitted four of each and turned it into a little bouquet.

“He’ll be happy if there’s a bunch of different ones to choose from, right? Maybe I should do white, yellow, and blue...? The same colors as mine. Maine, what are you gonna pick?”

Tory giggles happily to herself as she digs through the many different colors, picking out three that she likes. She seems very pleased with the hairpin that I’d made for her last year, which makes me happy as well.

“I think I’ll do pink, red, and green. The green flowers are going to look

like little leaves, which I think will be really cute.”

“Yeah! Really cute. ...Hey, hey, Maine, how do you make these?”

Tory, probably thinking that she’d better not disturb our mother as she single-mindedly weaves away, scoots her chair next to me, it clattering against the wooden floor. Since the hairpin that we’re using as an example had been made for Tory’s sake, she hadn’t had any part in making it.

“Oh, it’s not really that hard. So, you loop it like this, and then you thread it through like this...”

I explain to Tory how to weave these tiny flowers, demonstrating as I went. Since these are much simpler than the roses we made for Freida, Tory picked up on it immediately.

“Got it! Thanks, Maine.”

She clatteringly drags her chair back to its original position, then starts quietly, steadily knitting. After a while, once I’ve finished my third flower, I glance up at the rest of the table, and am overwhelmed by the sheer difference in quantity. My mother has already finished enough little flower to make an entire hairpin, and Tory has six flowers rolling around in front of her.

Whoa, now these are some sewing beauties.

Both my mother and Tory move their hands so quickly that my own movements can’t even compare. They can do these in practically the blink of an eye. I may be the one who brought this arts-and-crafts stuff here, but now I’m being outstripped in both speed of production and quality of product. I decide that, at the very least, whatever I make is not going to be obviously inferior to what they make when compared, and I start moving my needles again.

Ordinarily, winter handiwork is done while we’re trapped inside by the snow and left with far, far too much time on our hands. It’s something that we do because there’s nothing else to do, and we idly chat with each other while doing it. Tonight, however, thanks the gleam of the coins lined up on the table, the two of them are focusing their entire effort on knitting

as quickly as they can, with not a single word coming out of their mouths.

“Alright, done! Now what, Maine?”

I look up, startled by Tory’s sparkingly enthusiastic voice, and see that she has twelve flowers lined up in front of her.

“Whoa, Tory, that was fast! You’re really amazing. Ummm, after this, we sew them onto a bit of cloth... wait, argh, cloth! I didn’t account for cloth!”

“Usually,” my mother says, “we provide our own materials for winter handiwork, so it’s okay if you use whatever scraps we have lying around here.”

My mother has already retrieved a scrap of cloth and sewn her little flowers onto it, turning it into something that looks like a proper hairpin.

“...When I go see Mister Benno to collect the money for these, I’ll put in a request for some cloth, too.”

“He’s already paying us two whole medium copper coins for each of these, so there’s no need to go that far.”

...What? Man, how unfair is ordinary winter handiwork?

Even as I was deciding for myself that I’d have added cloth to my calculations by the time winter rolls around and we get started in earnest, Tory has already brought a basket full of scrap cloth out of the storage room.

“Look at the one Mommy’s finished as an example. Sew the flowers on, but don’t put too many of the same color close together. If you sew everything together so that you can’t see the cloth beneath, then it’ll really look like a little bouquet of flowers.”

“Got it, thanks!” replies Tory.

By the time Tory finishes putting together her second hairpin, it’s almost about time to pack everything away for the evening. Ultimately, I was able to complete about half of the flowers for one hairpin, Tory made an entire pin herself, and my mother’s eighty percent along the way towards making her second.

“Now then, here is today’s pa~ay!”

“Woohoo!”

I hand the two of them two coins each, and put the two finished hairpins in my box for later.

“Alright now,” says my mother, “you two go to bed.”

“What about you, Mom?” asks Tory. “I’ll just finish up this half-complete one here, first.”

She points at the eighty-percent completed hairpin in front of her with a grim smile. At her speed, she’ll be done in no time flat. Tory and I quietly head for bed, taking care not to wake our father in the process.

I wonder, though; why is it that by the time we wake up there are two finished hairpins sitting on top of the table? ...You pulled an all-nighter, mother. Tory didn’t want to go to bed last night, so now she’s gonna be mad.

“Mooooom, no fair! Why’d you get to stay up late?”

“Sorry, Tory. Now, it’s time for you to go to work! Take care, take care.”

Tory sulks furiously as my mother apologetically ushers her out the door. With an extremely disagreeable expression, she runs off, yelling “as soon as I get home I’m going to make lots, okay?” Once she’s gone, my mother hands me the two completed bouquets, and I give her four coins in return.

“Here’s the money, so that I don’t forget by the time you get home from work. I’m going to be going to Mister Benno’s shop again today. I’ve gotta go get the pin parts for these from Lutz, get them finished up, and get paid, otherwise I can’t get the rest of the money for you and Tory.”

“Alright. Take care of yourself today, Maine! And say hello to Mister Benno for me.”

My mother tucks the coins into her coin purse, then starts heading out the door. “Let’s work hard tonight, too!” she says with a broad smile as she waves goodbye. She shuts the door behind her firmly, and I hear the clack

of the lock as she turns it. I keep smilingly waving goodbye until I hear her footsteps fade away, then let out an exhausted sigh.

Crap. The power of money is way too strong. I hadn't thought I'd get anywhere close to this kind of speedup. The fact that my mother would stay up so late to keep working was far beyond my expectations. If I don't get these hairpins finished up and sold so that I can replenish my cash reserves, I'm going to be in serious trouble tonight.

"Well, first things first, we gotta peel off all the tronbay bark, though."

I have no idea when Lutz will be by to come pick me up, so I start making sure that I've got everything ready to head out on a moment's notice. First off, I collect a couple of the potato-like kalfe roots. Then, I grab my slate, slate pencils, and calculator so that we can study while the bark is steaming. Since we're going to Benno's afterwards, I make sure not to forget to bring my ordering set, too. Finally, In order to complete my own half-finished hairpin, I grab my knitting needles and thread, my seven already-done flowers, a scrap of cloth, and a needle and thread for sewing everything together.

I pass the time waiting for Lutz to arrive by working on more flowers, my needles making tiny little movements as I knit. After I manage to finish two, I hear a pounding at the door, followed by Lutz calling out, "Maine, you home?"

"Good morning, Lutz! Hey, about those pins, did you finish any?"

"I got five done so far...?" "Bring all of them with us. I'm bringing my needles and thread too. We can finish these up while we're steaming. We have to sell these to Mister Benno tonight."

When I mumble that we wound up finishing four of them last night, Lutz's eyes go wide.

"Wh... That's way too fast, though?! I thought you said those flowers were super hard to make and took a crazy long time..."

"Yeah, I had no idea they'd get done so quickly, either, so I'm honestly in a bit of a hurry now." "...Got it. You just need me to bring the pins, right?"

Anything else?”

There is one more thing that Lutz absolutely cannot forget to bring today.

“What about the butter? Did you get any?”

“So I didn’t hear you wrong, huh... I’ll go get some. Wait downstairs for me after you lock up, okay?”

It seems that, somehow, he hasn’t prepared any. That was a close call, I nearly missed out on being able to eat steamed, buttered potatoes. I wave as Lutz deftly runs down the stairs, gather up the things I’d prepared, and head outside.

“Man, it’s cold...”

There’s no sign of anyone else around our warehouse, which is piercingly cold, overpowering the warmth of the clear sunlight shining down. Since there’s no hearth inside the warehouse that we can light a fire in, we get set up right in front of the warehouse so that we can steam the tronbay and strip off the bark.

After we put our bags inside, Lutz piles up some rocks to make a stove and sets the pot on top of it while I line up pieces of tronbay inside our steamer. In no time flat, though, the steamer fills up completely.

“Lutz, looks like we’re going to need another steamer.”

“I’ll go get it.”

Previously, all we were doing was working on prototypes, so we never really needed to steam that much wood at once. However, this time, we need to steam all of the raw material that we have on hand. Since we’d had another steamer ready from the start so we could steam two layers at once, Lutz kindly goes to retrieve it for me.

“These okay to put on the pot yet?”

“Yeah, I’m just about finished getting this wood stacked up in it.”

While Lutz gets the steamers situated on top of the pot, I stack up the rest of the tronbay. Then, I take the two kalfe roots I brought with me and

make a cross-shaped cut on each of them with my knife so that the heat can get into them better, then I line them up in the steamer with the wood. Once these steam for about twenty minutes, I'll finally be able to eat delicious, buttery, steamed potatoes (although they're not actually potatoes).

Sitting in front of the pot, close to the fire, I get back to work on making tiny flowers. Since it takes me about fifteen minutes to make each flower, by the time I'm finished up, plus the time it'll take to get everything squared away, the tubers should be just about finished.

"Lutz, could you get some of the leftover bamboo in the warehouse and make me a couple long sticks? Pointy ones, pointier than the ones you made last time."

"Huh? Why?" "Why, you ask? I need them to check to see if the 'battered potatoes' are done." "Um? Hey, Maine, what are you up to?" "Oh, I just wanna eat some food you need a steamer to make... do you not want any, Lutz?" "If it's food then I want it! You mean 'buttah'd poh-tay-toes' are food?!"

Ah, that's right, I must not have explained what battered potatoes are. Although, there's already cooking here involving sautéing tubers in butter, so they should be something he could be eating regularly.

Now that he knows that there's food in the steamer too, Lutz cheerfully makes me a pair of bamboo skewers.

"Hey, Maine. These 'buttah'd poh-tay-toes', are they tasty?"

"I really like them, myself. I think it's something you've probably already tasted before, though?"

Since it takes far longer for the pot to actually come to a boil than I originally expected, I wait until I've finished two flowers, instead of just one, then check on the status of the tubers.

"Alright, Lutz. Get that lid off!"

Standing on top of Ralph's failed something-or-other, I brandish the skewers tightly in my right hand while gripping my cooking chopsticks in

my left, waiting for Lutz to take the lid off the steamer.

“Maine don’t stick your face too close!”

As soon as Lutz removes the lid, a huge burst of steam leaps out of the steamer. As soon as the scalding vapor clears away and I can see inside, I see the two tubers resting on top of the tronbay, tinted a vibrant golden brown. With my right hand, I carefully insert the skewers into each of the tubers. They come back out easily without the potatoes breaking apart, so I think they’re done pretty well. I swap the chopsticks in my left hand with the skewers in my right, and get them ready.

“Lutz, I need a plate!”

“You think this place has any?!” “That board over there’s fine, bring that over! Then get the butter ready.” “Maybe you should have done this instead of making decorations!” “Ngh, you’re right...” I say, ashamed.

As soon as I lift both of the tubers out of the steamer and set them down on the board, I have Lutz immediately put the lid back on the steamer. I hop down from my makeshift step stool, then immediately widen the cross-shaped cuts on each of them and shove butter inside. The butter melts into the soft flesh of the tubers immediately, and the scent it gives off is irresistible.

I’ve been getting more and more excited as these get closer and closer to completion. Lutz, on the other hand, merely looked disappointed as soon as he saw what I took out of the steamer.

“...Hey, those are just kalfe roots. I had really high hopes, since it’s your cooking...”

It seems that he’s disappointed that this is something he’s eaten before. Kalfe roots are a very common crop in the nearby areas, so they’re an ingredient that shows up on everyone’s dining tables very frequently. I wonder if he’s tired of them? I can see how he’d be disappointed; this is extremely simple cooking. I didn’t even peel them first.

“Right, right! These are just kalfe roots cooked with butter, and you’ve eaten lots of these before, right? So you don’t need to eat one, do you?”

“...I’ll eat it.”

I ignore Lutz as he grumbles to himself, quickly peeling the skin off the very top of the tuber. I wrap my hand in my apron so that it doesn’t get scalded, and pick it up. I bring the steaming potato up to my mouth, open wide, and take an enormous bite.

The surface of the tuber had cooled down quickly thanks to the frigid air, but the insides are piping hot as they melt within my mouth. Since they were steamed with the tronbay, they taste faintly of wood, like they were smoked. This flavor has intertwined with the savoriness of the butter, making a flavor that’s nothing like anything I could find at home.

“Mmm...,” I say, squirming in pleasure at the taste. Lutz, next to me, simply lets out a sigh, breath white in the cold air, then takes a bite of his own tuber. Immediately, his eyes fly wide open, and he stares in shock at the tuber. He looks back and forth between me and his food, looking like I’d tricked him somehow. Tilting his head in confusion, he takes another bite.

“...This is good! What is this?! This tastes totally different from the boiled kalfe root we eat at home!”

“It’s because they’re steamed. All the nutrients and flavor are locked in there by the steam. Today, since we steamed them with the tronbay too, it picked up the flavor of that too, like if we smoked it, so it has a really luxurious sort of taste.”

While we gleefully dig into our kalfe roots, I tell Lutz about what what happened last night while we were working on the hairpins.

“...So, yeah, Tory and Mommy were really amazing last night. They’re really fired up about tonight, too. I couldn’t even get one done, though, so I got reminded about how useless I really am, hah.”

“Don’t get too proud.” “How about you, Lutz? How’d it go?”

Lutz, who’s finished his entire kalfe root already, sadly licks the last remnants from his fingers, then shakes his head grimly.

“Nobody seemed to have any interest in anything I was doing, so even

when I asked them for help, they all just pretended to ignore me.”

“I see. Well, how about I come to your house today and cast my magic spell?” “Magic spell?” “Yup! Once we get our money from Mister Benno, I’ll go home with you, so look forward to it!”

Now that we’re done eating, I ask Lutz to draw some water from the well, then wash my hands and rinse out my mouth. Then, I take out the calculator that I’d brought and set it in front of Lutz.

“Ummm, so, today, we have four completed hairpins to sell.” Since we’re discussing business, I make sure to speak clearly and politely for Lutz. “Yesterday, Mister Benno paid us for one in advance, so today we will be paid for three. Each hairpin earns us eleven medium copper coins. Now then, how much money will we make today?”

As I explain the problem, Lutz listens with a serious expression, moving his fingers across the beads of the calculator.

“Thirty-three!”

“Correct! Well done, Lutz! Next, we’ve already established that you need to make twenty total pins. Yesterday, you made five. How many do you have left to make?”

As I thought, Lutz gets frustrated when doing calculations that involve carrying or borrowing numbers, even when he has a calculator to help him, because they can’t be done immediately. If he can’t learn how to do single-digit calculations automatically in his head, these things will take a while even if he has a calculator, so for now I take away the calculator, write a bunch of numbers on my slate, and have him start working on practicing addition.

“Let’s just work on memorizing this,” I say, speaking casually again. “You gotta get fast enough at this that you can answer immediately when asked something.”

Lutz grumbles, but gets to work studying. Meanwhile, I sit down next to him and work on finishing up my hairpin. By the time it’s done, it’s nearly noon, and the tronbay has finished steaming.

“Lutz, once I get each of these in the water, take them out please.”

One by one, I use my chopsticks to place the steamed sticks of tronbay into the tub full of water from the well. They hiss with steam as I push them down into the water, then Lutz takes them out and puts them onto a nearby board. Since this isn't flowing river water, the water in the tub quickly warms up.

“The water's getting pretty warm,” says Lutz. “One sec.”

While I wait for Lutz to draw fresh water from the well to refill the tub, I sit down and start working on stripping bark from each stick. Once the tub is full, I go back to soaking new sticks. This repeats for some time. After all of the wood has been removed from the steamer, I steadily keep working on stripping bark while the wood is still warm, and Lutz cleans up the pot and steamer. Finally, we hang the strips of bark from nails in the warehouse to dry, and our work for the day is complete.

“Woohoo, all done!”

“Alright, cleanup's all done too!”

Since I'd been stripping hot bark for so long, even after hanging everything out to dry my fingers are still prickling with heat. The cool air feels really nice on them right now. I take in a deep breath, filling my lungs with the cool, crisp air.

“...Huh?”

I'm not despairing over anything. I'm not anxious about anything. All I feel right now is the relief and sense of freedom you feel after finishing a difficult task.

Even still, the devouring fever rages within me. Reflexively, I turn all of my strength inwards, focusing on pinning it down again.

“Whoa, Maine?!”

Since I've suddenly gone rigid in front of him, Lutz shakes me frantically. I want to tell him that I'm trying to concentrate and that I want him to stop, but I'm struggling so hard against the pain that I can't form any

words. I shakily reach out my right hand and catch one of his. He grabs onto it tightly with both hands.

“What the...? You’re burning up?! Maine, are you alright? Can you hear me?!”

I focus on my tightly-squeezed hand, struggling to shut down the fever as I’ve done so many times before. Even though I’ve been imagining building a strong wall around my inner core to keep it shut in, this time a fragment of it managed to penetrate straight through.

Get back in there!

I manage to force the last embers of it back down into the depths of my heart, but I think this time is the longest it’s ever taken me.

Immediately after my fever goes away, I’m suddenly weighed down by fatigue so heavy that I don’t even want to move my mouth to speak. I don’t really have the strength to stand anymore, so I sit down on the spot. Lutz, still holding tightly to my hand, is pulled along, crouching beside me.

“Huh? Your fever... went down? What the hell is this? Hey! Maine! Are you okay?!”

“...That was... the devouring. You know, the thing Frieda was talking about?”

I let out an enormous sigh as I answer, and Lutz frowns worriedly.

“Wait, hang on. You’re saying that there’s no sign at all that you’re suddenly about to get really sick?”

“It comes really quickly. Until now, it’s only happened when I’m feeling really strong emotions, but lately even the tiniest flicker of emotion seems to let it out... man, that startled me.”

I really was startled, but I picked such an ordinary word to finish that off with to try to lessen the raw shock of it all. Lutz, though, still looks like he’s almost about to cry, still clutching my hand tightly. Trying to give him at least a little peace of mind, I smile broadly up at him.

“Is there... anything you can do?”

“...Frieda told us already, didn’t she? It takes a huge amount of money. Mister Benno said the same thing.”

The blood instantly drains from his face, leaving him white as a sheet.

“And, since that’s that, shall we go to Mister Benno’s shop now so that we can earn a little money?”

I show him a happy smile, hiding the honest fact that putting in any large amount of physical effort would be intensely difficult. Lutz clenches his teeth tightly, then lets go of my hand and spins around so that his back is facing me.

“I’ll carry you to the shop. ...It’s all I can do, after all.”

“It’s all you can do? Don’t you already do a lot for me, though?” “Argh, just get on!”

I hear a quaver in his voice as he’s urging me on. I pretend not to hear it, though, and lean against his back, draping my arms over his shoulders.

Man, I’m beat, I think to myself.

Back when I was Urano, living life without ever looking up from my books, I’d never had a friend who’d cry for me like this. I don’t know if saying anything now is the right thing to do here. I’ve read about it in books, but I’m still not sure at all.

Lutz, you’re too kind. No matter how useless I am, you stay with me. I’m not even the real Maine, and you know that, but you’ve forgiven me.

“If I ever pass out from the devouring, Lutz, it’s not your fault at all. It really, really does come without any warning. ...And there’s no way I’m gonna lose anytime soon. I haven’t made a single book yet.”

Chapter 47: Interlude - The Power of Money

“If I ever pass out from the devouring, Lutz, it’s not your fault at all. It really, really does come without any warning. ...And there’s no way I’m gonna lose anytime soon. I haven’t made a single book yet.”

I don’t want her to see my miserable, crying face, so I’m carrying her on my back. However, since I’m doing so, I don’t have a free hand to wipe the tears running down my face. One by one, the teardrops fall onto Maine’s sleeve, leaving little wet spots.

I want to help her, but I can’t. I can only grit my teeth at how powerless I am.

Maine always keeps saying that she’s completely useless, but I don’t know what I’d do without her.

When I said I wanted to become a trader, my family disregarded it completely, telling me not to be ridiculous, but Maine just smiled and told me to follow my dream. When I was first introduced to Benno, I was so terrified that I wanted to flee on the spot, but Maine held my hand and helped me through it. When there wasn’t anything I could do on my own, Maine stuck with me, helping me think and helping me act so that I could become an apprentice. Even now, when I’m wondering if it’s even a good idea for me to become a merchant, Maine’s teaching me how to write, how to read numbers, how to do math, how to think about money... everything.

And despite all that, there’s nothing I can do to help her when she’s suffering from the devouring.

I don’t have the kind of money to help her. I’ve started to earn a little bit of money, but all that was things that she thought of. If I hadn’t helped her, if she was stronger, if she’d gotten more help from the adults, I wonder if she’d have been able to make paper a lot faster and earn a lot more money? If that’s the case, would she have made enough money to save herself?

I can't think about anything else. I'm so weak that I'm miserable, regretful... shameful.

If I wasn't a kid, if I was an adult, I wonder if I'd be able to help her? If I was a merchant like Master Benno, if I had that kind of money, maybe I...

I swallow everything down, grit my teeth, and keep walking forward, Maine on my back. If there's anyone who can help Maine, anyone who has enough influence and money to help Maine, I'll find them at Benno's.

Master Benno will surely save Maine. He knows just how much the things Maine can make are worth, so I'm positive he'll help.

When we arrive at the store, Mark and Benno are lying in wait for us. Mark has a worried look on his face while Benno is scowling unpleasantly. Since I still haven't been able to wipe away my tears, I hang my head low, not wanting them to see my soggy, miserable face. As I stare down at the ground, the tips of Benno's shoes come into view.

He sighs heavily. "...this kid."

I thought he'd just walked up to sigh at us, but suddenly all the weight disappeared from my back.

"Eek?!" cries Maine, startled.

I snap my head up to see Benno hold Maine up roughly and then toss her over to Mark. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest when I see Maine hurtling through empty air.

"Wh...?!"

"Whoa?!" exclaims Mark.

As soon as I'm sure that Mark's caught her securely, I allow myself a moment of relief before turning to face Benno angrily. The instant before I start to yell "what are you doing to a sick little girl?!", he jerks his chin towards the shop.

"Lutz, let's go. You and me."

I open and close my mouth wordlessly, my fervor suddenly evaporating, then follow Benno into the shop. As I try to convince myself that there's

no problem entrusting her to Mark, or at least that it's far better than letting Benno take care of her, I hear the door close behind me and frantically wipe my face clean with my sleeve.

Benno motions to the table we always use. As soon as I sit down, he fixes his glimmering, reddish-brown eyes on me. He studies me from head to toe, then opens his mouth.

"...Was it the devouring?"

"How did you..." "Despite the fact that you were carrying her, Maine seemed to be doing pretty well. I thought that her fever must have suddenly spiked and then gone down again just as suddenly. You're together all the time, but is this your first time seeing that?"

I nod, gulping. Even though I've been by Maine's side whenever we went to the forest, went to the store, and worked on making paper, this is my first time actually seeing the symptoms of the devouring manifest.

There wasn't a single sign that her condition was worsening, but suddenly she got a fever so hot that I wondered if her body was going to melt. Something wispy and yellow drifted off from her, like steam rising from her whole body. It was astoundingly terrifying.

"Master Benno, please, help Maine. I can't do anything. I'm just a kid, I don't have any money, I can't do anything..."

"I can't."

In a quiet voice, Benno immediately shoots down my request.

"Why?! You're a grown-up, you have money, you do a lot of business with the noblemen..."

As I desperately make my argument, Benno's face twists as if in pain, or regret. Grinding his teeth, he shakes his head.

"I told you my business was rapidly growing. When it comes to trading with the nobility, I'm a newcomer on the scene, relatively speaking. I don't have many connections. I'm still at a point where they see me as someone at their feet, ready to be ripped off. ...I can't do anything, either."

“Master Benno... even you can’t...?”

I’m left speechless by Benno’s completely unexpected words. Benno, who owns this huge shop, who does business with the nobility, is saying that he’s powerless to help Maine; is curing the devouring completely impossible? As everything in front of me starts to grow dim, I remember the one person I know of who has been cured.

“But, I thought Frieda was cured... then maybe the guild leader...!”

“I already talked with him.” “Huh?”

Benno takes a shallow breath, then reaches up to scratch at his head. A wry, sarcastic smile floats over his troubled face, and he shrugs.

“He said that, if you have money, you can temporarily stave it off. Since he’s willing to spend any amount of money so that his granddaughter could keep living, he’s been working with a disgraced noble family this entire time, constantly paying them to use a broken magical tool. Using it just once costs him two small gold coins.”

“G... gold?!”

When I got the one small silver coin for selling that paper, I’d been so thrilled at how much money I’d just earned, but it seems like Maine needs gold, not just silver. The thought of such an unattainable amount of money makes my head spin.

“However, even that’s only enough to buy about a half year’s worth of time. Even if I spent that much money once to keep her alive, I’d have to spend it again before you know it. Maine, especially, is very young. As she grows up, the symptoms of the devouring are only going to get worse, and more and more frequent. You think I have that much money to spend on a single apprentice? It’s impossible, for me.”

If what Benno’s saying is right, then it really is impossible. There’s no way he’d be able to spend that kind of money. However, just saying it’s impossible and giving up is giving up on Maine’s life.

“There’s not much I can do,” he says. “I can buy the unusual knowledge that she has from her, giving her some gold to make up for it. When it

starts to get too bad to deal with, I'll probably hand her over to that old bastard. ...So, what can you do?"

Benno stares at me with sharp, predatory eyes. Without thinking about it, I glare back at him. He's an adult, with power, brains, money, and everything, and he still can't do anything to help Maine. What could I possibly do?

"...I can't do anything at all. I'm just a kid. I'm not strong, I'm not smart, I don't have any money... if there's something I can do, tell me, please."

"Don't make her have to look after you. Don't make her worry." "Wh...?!"

His immediate response makes my breath catch in my throat. He's hit the target so cleanly that I have no way to respond at all. My eyes grow hot with chagrin. Benno's facial expression softens a just a little bit, but his eyes are still sharp as he opens his mouth to speak.

"Listen up, Lutz. That kid out there is not the little girl she seems to be. At the very least, even when she's suffering, she doesn't want to make you worry, so she puts on a brave smile for you. Make sure you don't let her trick you with that."

I remember that after the devouring fever went back down down, when her breathing was still heavy and ragged, she had a bright, happy smile on her face. Seeing her smiling like that really did make me feel relieved, but it looks like maybe that was a mistake.

"You're a man, so don't give her anything else to worry about. You can't pretend like you don't know anything, so cooperate with her so that she can buy herself a little more time to live. If you're going to say grandiose things like 'I'm going to make whatever Maine comes up with', then take every single one of her ideas, make them, and sell them! If you've got time to cry, then you've got time to think. You've got time to work. Make some money!"

"...Alright."

I raise my head, full of determination, and Benno's lips stretch into a broad grin.

“Now that’s the right kind of face, hm?”

“Oh, Lutz!” says Maine. “You done with your conversation? Look, look! I finished up getting us paid for the hairpins we brought today.”

She’s smiling, as usual, as I come out of Benno’s office to meet her. She has a very carefree expression on, but when I remember Benno’s advice and look more closely I can see that despite her smile there’s a hint of worry in her eyes. Feeling like I should be scolding myself for making her worry, I put on a smile, refusing to be defeated.

“That’s a lot,” I enthuse. “I think we’ll be good for about two or three more days with this.”

“Two or three?!” “Honestly, I have no idea just how far my mother’s going to rampage through this project, and Tory’s just as fired up as my mother is...”

As we banter back and forth, I can see Maine start to loosen up, bit by bit. I think I probably managed to give her a little bit of peace of mind. Behind me, Benno comes out of his office with his usual stern expression, shrugging his shoulders.

“Don’t just chit-chat in my shop. If you’re done with your business here, then go straight home and, Maine, get right to bed. Lutz says you’re not a hundred percent right now.”

As Benno waves his hands to shoo us out of his shop, he seems to suddenly think of something and amends his previous statement.

“Mark, go with these two. It’s dangerous for kids like these to be walking around with that kind of money.”

“Certainly, sir.”

In order to make it easy to pay Tory and the others, Maine got all of the money in medium copper coins. Since there’s thirty-three of them, they’ll probably jangle loudly when we walk around. If unbaptized children such as ourselves carry around that kind of money, then, of course, we’d be incredibly conspicuous.

Now that the danger of being robbed or attacked has been pointed out to her, Maine forgoes her usual “no thank you, it’s all right” routine and obediently offers the bag of money to Mark. Mark exchanges a brief look with Benno, then reaches down to pick up both the bag and Maine herself.

“I-I can walk on my own!!”

“Were you not just carried here by Lutz, Maine? You’re such a good girl, so please come along quietly so that the rest of us can rest easily.”

“Nnngh...”

Maine, having lost any means of resistance, stops struggling and just hangs her head. It seems like she doesn’t have any way to fight against Mark’s gentle words.

This is a good discovery. I should work quickly to learn how to talk like Mark.

On the way home, Maine and Mark discuss things like how to handle the winter handiwork and how to manage the finished products. I pay close attention, since I’m going to be doing the exact same thing too.

I thought that we were going to go our separate ways when we reached the plaza with our water well, but Mark doesn’t put Maine down, saying that he’ll bring the money all the way to her home and explain things to her family. I part ways with the two of them, deeply appreciative of how considerate Mark is.

“Lutz, I’ll stop by later,” says Maine.

I wave goodbye at them as they head into the building, then I turn towards my own home. My feet suddenly feel like lead weights as I drag myself forwards.

“I’m home,” I say, as I close the door behind me. “What, empty handed today?”

Zasha, my oldest brother, looks me up and down, raising an eyebrow. For unbaptized kids like me, going to gather things from the forest is effectively a full-time job, but since I’ve lately been going to Benno’s shop a lot, I haven’t been able to do enough gathering. My family, I know,

doesn't actually care about the circumstances why.

"Seriously. You didn't even go earn any money, huh?"

If I'd come back with some money, things might have been a little better, but only a little. Ralph really doesn't like how much money I've made in such a short period of time, and lately he's been really strict with me.

I put my things in my room, lie down on my bed, and let out a long sigh. Ever since I started saying that I wanted to be a merchant, everyone in my family has been uncomfortably icy towards me. I know that if I just said I was going to give up on that and be a craftsman instead, things would instantly improve, but I also know that I'd regret that forever.

Knock, knock!

"Good afternoon, Miss Carla. Is Lutz here?"

"Oh, Maine! It's good to see you. I just heard him come home a little while ago... Lutz, Maine's here!"

At the sound of my mother's voice, all of my older brothers immediately rush forward, dragged by Maine's invisible grip on their stomachs. By the time I manage to make it out of my room, she's already been completely surrounded to the point that I can't even see her anymore.

"What's up? Do you have a new recipe?"

"I'll help! What do you need?" "Nuh-uh," she says, "not today. I'm just here to pay Lutz what I owe him." "You owe him?" "Yep! He helped me with my winter handiwork, so I owe him for that."

Maine squeezes her way out of the crowd and walks up to me, with the kind of self-satisfied smirk she gets when she's scheming something. "Lutz, your hand, please," she says, and I stick it out. Then, she exaggeratedly places coins into the palm of my hand, one by one.

"You helped with five pins, so I owe you five medium copper coins. One, two, three, four, five. That's right, right?"

"Yeah."

The coins clink against each other as she places them into my hand, and

I'm suddenly aware that the gazes of all of my older brothers are firmly fixed to the spot. My palm seems to tingle under the pressure of their stares, and I hear someone gulp nervously.

"Hey, Maine. You said Lutz helped you, was that those sticks he was making yesterday?"

Maine, waiting for Ralph to say those exact words, puts on a sweet, but very, very forced, smile.

"That's right! I'm making hairpins, so I asked him to help with the pin part. One pin is one medium copper coin."

"That's worth that much?!"

Zasha's eyes fly wide open, staring again at the coins in my palm. Zeke, his doubts seemingly erased now that he actually sees me holding money, takes a sharp breath and looks over at Maine.

"...Does it have to be Lutz that does it? Can I help too?"

Zeke is the one to ask the question, but it's on all of my brothers' minds. All of them turn to look at her. She looks back at them easily, smiling and nodding.

"No, it doesn't really have to be Lutz. But, they need to be a specific size, and they need to be polished really smooth so that they don't catch in anyone's hair, so it's not really casual work, you know?"

As soon as my brothers hear those words, they all scramble to be the first to talk themselves up.

"Maine, Maine. I'm way better at woodworking and carpentry than Lutz is. I do it every day at my job, you know."

"Me, I'm definitely better than Lutz." "If we're talking about experience, then I've got the most of it, right?"

Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, guys. Who was it yesterday that told me I should go off and make those boring little sticks all by myself?

"Oh man, I can't believe we were so stupid yesterday!"

“Lutz, why didn’t you tell us you were getting paid for these?” “Were you going to hog all the money for yourself?”

I’m pretty sure I told them about it, but they probably ignored me, thinking I was making things up. My brothers’ memories have been repainted by the power of cold, hard cash, making me into the bad guy here. All of my brothers are staring at me with a dangerous look in their eyes, and I’m suddenly extremely aware of how terrifying money can be. As my brothers start closing in around me, Maine claps her hands together.

“So, would you three make them for me, then? I’d need five from each of you. If you make more than that, I won’t be able to use them. I’ll be back in three days to get them, okay?”

“Yeah, leave it to me!”

“I don’t even need three days.” “I can do them right away.”

Maine holds up a single finger, grinning impishly.

“Precision is more important than speed! If you don’t make them exactly, I won’t be able to use them and you’ll have to redo them. ...Oh, right! You should ask Lutz about how big they need to be and what kind of wood you should be using. Okay then, I’ll see you guys in three days to pick these up!”

My brothers, with big smiles on their faces, wave to Maine as she heads out the door. The instant the door shuts behind her, though, their attitudes immediately change. They grab onto me tightly and drag me to our room.

“So, what kind of wood do we need?”

“How big are they?” “You’re not getting anything this time, heh.”

Their tools are already in their hands as they close in around me, demanding an explanation. I’m left dumbfounded by their complete and utter turnaround from yesterday, where they didn’t even bother paying attention to what I was doing.

“Don’t just stand there!”

“Tell us, quickly!” “O... okay!”

I answer all the questions they have about the kinds of wood and how to make them, and they immediately set to work. In the blink of an eye, I’ve been completely tossed aside. Then, most frustratingly, my brothers start immediately churning out beautiful hairpins, far faster than I could have made them, thanks to their job experience.

Ah. Is this how Maine feels when she’s always saying she isn’t good for anything?

I, having been forgotten in a corner, get out my slate and calculator. This is something that I should be doing. I can leave the crafting to the craftsmen.

On our way home, Maine had told me to do three things.

First, on a board, I should make a note of the number of pins that we make. Then, I should make sure that I keep that board hidden securely, so that nobody can arbitrarily add more to it. Lastly, I should use my calculator to work out what my total commission on these is, remembering that my commission for each pin is four medium copper coins.

“Aha, done!”

“Man, I’m way ahead of you.” “Ralph, that looks kinda sloppy. If you don’t do it right, Maine can’t use it, right?”

From the sounds of it, my brothers have started competing to see who can make them the best.

“Lutz, how’s this look?”

“...Yeah, that looks great! Good job, Zasha.”

Zasha has finished one, so I’ve made four coins.

“Look, I’m done too!”

“That’s perfect, Zeke!”

Zeke finished another, so now I’m up to eight.

While I'm sitting here practicing my writing, I'm not actually making anything myself, but when see my commission fees steadily ticking up on my calculator I suddenly understand.

Chapter 48: Maine Collapses

It's been three days since Lutz's older brothers promised to make hairpin parts for me. Today is the day I go to pick them up.

While secluded at home for the last few days, I managed to complete enough flowers for two hairpins. If you include the one I made before, I was only able to make three out of the whole twenty. All the rest were made by my mother and Tory. The sheer difference in speed is pretty depressing. The two of them, as before, seemed to race against each other while making their flowers. Tory's speed has improved immensely by now, and between the two of them they made twelve more pins' worth of flowers over the last three days. Right now, they've split up the work to get the last pin finished.

"I'm gonna go over to Lutz's house now. I gotta go pick up the pins and give them their money," I say. "Have fun," say the two of them, in monotone unison. Neither of them even look up, they're so engaged in their work.

I put fifteen medium copper coins in a small coin purse and walk out the front door. I head down the stairs, exit the building, walk through the water well plaza, start climbing the stairs of the building that's basically in the front.

Lutz's home is on the sixth floor, but they've rented two floors' worth of space. There's lots of stairways, and going up and down them is really difficult, but the interior is spacious. Even though there's four boys living there, it's not actually that cramped. Lutz, however, says that it's full of all sorts of craftsman's tools and there's a lot of space set aside for work, so it's not really as big as it sounds.

I knock on the door and announce myself, and after a moment the door swings open with a creak, revealing Auntie Carla.

"Good afternoon, Auntie Carla. Are the boys home? I'm here to pick up some handiwork that I asked them to make for me."

"They are!" she says, beaming. "They've been waiting restlessly for you

all morning.”

Once she says that, her face darkens a bit. She furtively glances around a bit, then leans in, speaking in a lower voice.

“...Hey, Maine. Lutz is really serious about being a merchant, isn't he? He's being very stubborn, so the mood in the house has been pretty bad lately. Even still, he doesn't look like he's going to back down. Wanting to be a merchant isn't something to tear up a family over! Don't you agree?”

I'd already heard from Lutz that things weren't going particularly well for him at home, but this looks more serious than I'd thought. He may be worried, but Lutz does not back down. After all, he's already made up his mind that he's going to be a live-in apprentice if he has to.

“I don't think I can answer that, Auntie Carla. Lutz is the one who'd make that decision, you know?”

An outsider like me butting into a parent-child dispute is only going to sow more discord, so I just tilt my head doubtfully to one side. Carla, having not gotten the agreement she was looking for, frowns sourly, her lips pointed.

“Well, I guess you're right. If I'd had a girl, she'd do what her parents said, but boys just don't listen to anything. They're so disagreeable.”

Well, as for me, I have no real intention of living my life like my parents want me to. I'll just keep that to myself, though.

Auntie Carla's grumblings show no signs of stopping. Her sons, very much used to how troublesome their mother's ranting could be, stay out of sight lest they get dragged up into it, and Auntie Carla hasn't yet invited me inside. I should just politely agree with her and head her off before she gets really going. Unlike the older ladies who are more than willing to have long conversations outside by the water well as snow piles up around them, I have no particular desire to stand here and chat in this freezing entranceway.

“It must be rough living with four boys, Auntie Carla.”

“It is! And they don't even appreciate how hard they're making it on me.

You know, the other day..."

Ahh... crap. I have a feeling I'm going to be out here forever.

At about the time I start to wonder if I should just start over entirely, I hear Lutz call out from within the house.

"Hey, Mom. Didn't Maine come to pick up that handiwork? She needs to get it before the snow starts falling, so I think she's in a bit of a rush. It's also really easy for her to get sick, so let her in, please!"

"Ah, that's right. Come in, Maine." "Thank you," I say.

Lutz and I exchange glances. You seriously saved me, thank you so much, I say silently. Sorry my mom talks so much, he replies.

Finally, I'm able to enter Lutz's house. It really is warm in here compared to outside.

"Lutz," I say, "did your big brothers finish their work? And did you make sure to practice your math?"

"Yeah." "...Maine, are you perhaps the one teaching Lutz how to do math?"

Lutz's mother, seemingly having listened in on our conversation, asks that question in a somewhat pointed voice. There's an undercurrent of "don't make my life any more difficult" buried in there, which I completely disregard, instead turning to smile up at her.

"Yeah! I've been helping with math at the gates."

"Ahh, you've been helping your father, then? That's so wonderful. It would be really nice, though, if Lutz would help his father out with his own apprenticeship."

In this world, a young girl generally helps her parents out with their work until she gets married to a boy that her parents introduce her to. Then, she helps her husband with his work. If she were in a rural farming area, she'd be helping out with farm work, so she'd marry a farmer.

In other words, while I, the daughter of a soldier, have been studying various things, others have had the expectation that it's so that I can

eventually become the kind of wife that can support a soldier. It is actually really difficult to be the wife of a soldier, with their irregular work hours and such, and whether or not she's able to adapt to it depends largely on if there are other soldiers in the family and if she already understands what the job entails.

I wonder if Carla had heard that my father is letting me help him out at the gate to help me with my future prospects? Unfortunately, I'm rocketing along the path towards my merchant's apprenticeship, and have not even the tiniest shred of an intention of becoming the wife of a soldier.

As I head deeper into the house, Lutz's brothers are lying in wait, gripping hairpins in each hand. When I get close, they all simultaneously stand up, shoving their fistfuls of pins in my face.

"Hey, Maine! Take a look."

"I got these done in no time at all." "I think these are perfect!" "W-whoa!" I stammer. "Line up! By year!"

Having a whole bunch of sharpened hairpins thrust into my face is actually terrifying. I wave my hands frantically as I dodge out of the way. In a flash, the three of them line up in order of age, just like I asked. One by one, I examine each hairpin and deliver them their pay. Not a single step had been skipped. The smooth finish and expert craftsmanship causes a smile to float across my face.

"All three of you did way better than Lutz did! You really are professionals. Tory and Mommy are better than me at what I'm making at home, too. Hey, guys! Do you think I could ask you to help me with my handiwork this winter, too? I'd have to wait to pay you until the spring, but the pay would be the same."

"Yeah, leave it to us!"

The three older brothers agreed to the work with big smiles. Thanks to the fact that they're going to be doing the actual handiwork, Lutz should be free to focus all of his efforts on studying.

“Lutz, did you do the calculations? How much is it?”

“Six thousand leon, so six large copper coins. ...Is that right?”

This time, Lutz’s older brothers made fifteen pin parts. Since each one makes him four medium copper coins, that’s six large copper coins in total. He’s making a killing just off of the commission.

“Yep, that’s perfect! Let’s keep practicing calculations like that. I’m gonna go bring these home now and finish them up; how does going to Mister Benno’s shop tomorrow sound?”

“Sounds good to me.”

By the time I gather up the pins and return home, the final decorations have been completed. I work with Tory and my mother to sew everything together and finish off each pin.

“I’m gonna go bring these to the shop tomorrow and bring back the rest of the money, okay? You guys were so fast, I couldn’t keep up with the amount of money I already had.”

When I’d originally asked Benno to give me some money in advance, I thought that we’d wind up delivering only ten hairpins. I’m actually kind of shocked that we managed to make twenty. Both my mother’s raw determination in the face of money and Tory’s massive speed increase were far beyond anything I could have imagined.

“Heh heh, I’m getting pretty fast, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, Tory, you’re amazing! We’ll be able to make so many of these this winter.” “Right! Let’s work hard and make a bunch!”

I must tip my hat towards Tory, who is walking steadily along the road of becoming a sewing beauty. I simply cannot compare.

The next day, Lutz and I head for Benno’s shop, completed hairpins in hand. As we walk along the cobbled road, Lutz asks me a question.

“Hey, Maine. Do you have any other things you can to sell?”

“Huh?” “Master Benno told me that if you wanted to do anything about the devouring, you need a lot of money. When we start selling paper in the

spring, it looks like we'll sell it for a really high price, though, but if you had anything else, then... If you think of something, I'll make it, after all."

Seeing the honest worry in his face, I start to think if there's any new products I could come up with to do something about the devouring.

"Hmmm, let me think. All the things I've come up with until now that can earn a lot of money are things aimed at wealthy people, huh."

It's obvious that everyday necessities are goods that require spending constant amounts of money. Even the hairpins, though, if we increase the quality of the thread and change the designs, the pricing will be way different, and paper made from the very rare tronbay will be more expensive as well. As such, if we want to make a ton of money, what we need are products that the upper class are likely to want.

"I don't really have a clue what wealthy people want, though. Rinsham, hairpins, and paper are all things that used to be all around me."

"Man, your world must have been amazing..."

Lutz, who's fully aware of the fact that I have memories that aren't just Maine's, is not only not creeped out by it, but is actually interested. So, when it's just the two of us talking, that's the only time I don't have to keep my memories of Japan purposefully concealed.

As I've only become more and more nostalgic about it, I haven't been able to say anything but the most amazing things about it, so I think the image Lutz has of Japan is that of an amazing utopia. To me, it certainly was a utopia compared to here, if only because of the proliferation of bookstores and libraries. Even now, if I could, I'd go back in a heartbeat.

"I guess I could try taking hints from 'dollar stores' and think of things that could improve people's daily lives? Maybe improving soap, or making more stylish candles? I made some herb candles last year, but I guess those might be a good idea."

"Herb candles?" asks Lutz, tilting his head to one side and frowning. "During last year's winter preparations, the candles were extremely smelling, so I added herbs to some of them to try to eliminate the smell. I

found some that smelled good, but I also found a bunch that synergized terribly and smelled awful, too. My mom told me not to mess with things I shouldn't and forbade me from making them this year."

While I was laying in bed, I'd said that I wanted to make herb candles, but my mother immediately refused and strictly forbade me from leaving my bed. That was absolutely not just out of concern for my health, but probably much more that she was worried about the candles I'd make.

"Man, you get in trouble a lot."

"Urgh... Trial and error is an indispensable part of making things! For some other ideas, my baskets and lacework were pretty popular, so I wonder if I could make some other kind of 'arts and crafts'... wait, no, 'arts and crafts' aren't usually very useful at all."

Even while casually dismissing my own idea, I dig through my memories from my Urano period for any useful sort of arts and crafts.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. In the end, what can we do?"

No matter what we make, we'll need to start by making all the tools we'll need for that, just like we did with the paper. When I think about that, all of my will to actually do any of that instantly vanishes. Honestly, if it's not going to be something that can immediately improve my own life, I actually can't summon up very much energy.

"Ummm, I think my biggest problem right now for coming up with new products is that I really can't get fired up for making a bunch of tools for things I won't actually use in my own life."

"You have to!" yells Lutz. "Do you want to die?!" "It's not that I'm not worried, it's just that I'm not very enthusiastic for making things I don't think are necessities, like, next up is a book..." "Hey, wait! You're the only one actually saying that if you yourself don't think something's essential then nobody else is going to buy it! Think of something we can sell!"

Lutz is a little teary-eyed, maybe from getting a bit too agitated. I pat him gently on the shoulder.

“Lutz, you should calm down a bit.”

“You’re the one making me agitated!” “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, sorry.”

As I soothe Lutz’s nerves, somebody suddenly grabs my head from above.

“Aaah!”

“Just what are the two of you talking about in the middle of the street? People are laughing; was that supposed to be funny?”

When I hear the familiar sound of Benno’s voice, I look around my surroundings. Just as he says, I can hear people chuckling as they watch the two of us with small smiles. My face goes red with embarrassment, and I channel my urge to lash out angrily into a fierce glare up at him.

“Mister Benno, why might you be here?”

“I’m on my way back from the workshops. What about you two?” “We finished the hairpins and were going to deliver them to you.” “Ah, really? Then, let’s go.”

Benno promptly picks me up and starts walking off at an impatiently brisk pace. From over his shoulder, I see Lutz having to jog to keep up.

He doesn’t even put me down once we enter the shop, instead carrying me to his office and setting me next to our usual table. I climb up into a chair, then pull the hairpins from my tote bag, lining them up on the table in front of me.

“Counting the ones we delivered before, this makes a total of twenty,” I say. “Please look them over.”

“...Great, now I can sell hairpins, too. The baptismal ceremony is next Earth Day, so this is pretty urgent.”

Since there’s nobody in my house with any connection with this season’s baptismal ceremony, I don’t particularly care about the details, so I nod politely without paying much attention to what he was actually saying. Then, I realize there was a new vocabulary word I hadn’t heard before.

“...Hey, Lutz. What’s Earth Day?”

“What?! What are you saying... Earth Day is... Earth Day, right?”

Since it seems that Lutz can't actually explain it, he passes the buck on to Benno. Benno sighs, then starts explaining it to me.

“They're the names of the days that constantly cycle around. Water Day, Sprout Day, Fire Day, Leaf Day, Wind Day, Fruit Day, and Earth Day, you know?”

Huh? “You know,” he says, but I don't actually now. This is literally the first time I'm hearing it. Are these the days of the week?

“Spring is the season of water, when the snow melts and the sprouts start to grow. Summer is the season of fire, when the sun is the closest and the leaves are growing. Autumn is the season of wind, when the cold air is blowing and the fruits are ripe. Winter is the season of earth, when all life is sleeping. That's why Earth Day is the day of rest, when we close the shop.

Earth Day is basically Sunday then. Got it. Since my mother had days off on fixed intervals, I knew that the concept of days in a week technically existed, but since there's no calendars in my home, my dad has an irregular schedule, and nobody ever actually mentioned any of the days by name, so I just didn't know them. So, the days of the week have names? Perfect.

“Huh,” says Lutz, “I didn't know that. I knew what the names were, but I didn't know what they meant.”

“That kind of discussion happens around baptism time. The baptismal ceremonies for each season happen on the first day of that season, so the winter ceremony is on Earth Day.” “Ah, I see.”

Since there's neither garbage pickup days nor any calendars, the average working person, in their day-to-day lives, doesn't need to know about any other day besides their weekly day off. If the subject isn't specifically brought up at all, you can live your life without needing to think about it.

Even when making arrangements with people, we haven't needed to use anything besides saying how many days in the future it'll be. Perhaps

that's preferred over the days of the week because it's easier for both parties to understand? From what Benno's saying, this seems like it's got primarily religious significance. Learning more about this subject makes me kind of uncomfortable, though, so I think it shouldn't be a problem if I just leave it at that for now.

"That's enough about the names of days. How about we finish settling this account?"

"Sure, it's not like it's particularly useful information, ordinarily."

We finalize the transaction. I take the money I owe Tory and my mother in medium copper coins, which I put in my coin purse, which then goes back in my tote bag. As for the rest of the money, I touch my card to Benno's to add it to my savings.

"There's one more thing I'd like to talk to you about."

As I was packing up to leave, since our business was finished and I didn't want to get in the way of Benno's work, he grabs my arm to stop me.

"Did you come up with any new product ideas? That's what you were talking about on the way here, right?"

I have no idea for just how long he'd been listening to our conversation, but judging from the fact that his eyes are brimming with expectation, I see that it was him who kindled Lutz's sudden passion in coming up with new ideas.

...Well, I do need the money, so it's not like it's that big of a problem.

For the last few days, the devouring fever has been steadily growing more restless, and pinning it down has taken longer and been more exhausting each time. To be perfectly honest, I can't be sure my body will last long enough for me to actually save up enough money. There's no actual reason for me to openly say something so extremely pessimistic, so I shrug lightly shrug and decide to play along.

"Mister Benno, can you think of any sorts of things that would sell for a lot of money? I think that if you want to make a lot of money, you need to sell something unusual or an expensive consumable item to the upper

class.”

“Sure, that’s a good start,” he says, nodding, with a hint of a wry smile. “If I’m selling something unusual, though,” I continue, “then it loses its meaning once everyone has it and it stops being unusual, but if someone uses a consumable item, that means they have to buy it again, so that’s something you can make money off of forever. ...Now that I think about it, about the rinsham, you’re probably making a lot of money off of that, aren’t you?” “Yeah, you could say that.”

All of the profits from the rinsham are exclusively Benno’s, so he says that with a broad, self-assured smile. Incidentally, the high-quality rinsham should be done as well, so he should be starting to sell it soon. If I can think of something like rinsham, I think it’ll earn quite a bit of money.

“My gut feeling is that I should go with more beauty products after all, maybe? You can’t underestimate the passion of a beauty-conscious woman, you know.”

Cosmetics are expensive. Even though they’re expensive, there are many women out there searching for products that suit them and will spend unreservedly on something that might make them a little more beautiful. I think that the nobility and upper class especially will be willing to shell out for effective products. Benno, perhaps having exactly the same idea I am, looks at me with glittering eyes, leaning forward across the table with anticipation.

“What are you thinking?”

“Ummm... personally, I want a high-quality, good smelling soap. After that, since a lot of these are used during the winter, I think candles that have a variety of different scents pretty popular, maybe? I feel like the herb candles I made last week would make a decent product. After that, this is something that I don’t need right now, but I think there would be solid demand for some kind of facial lotion.”

As things come to mind, I count them off on my fingers, and soon I’m able to list off a few things that might be decent products to sell. Lutz’s eyes are shining too, now, as he looks eagerly at me.

“Hey, Maine,” he says, “do you know how to make all those things?”

“Ummm, I know enough to get started. It’s like the paper, getting the materials and the tools is going to be a big effort, and there’s going to be a lot of trial and error in order to get the fine details down...” “Alright, give it a shot!” says Benno, grinning broadly as he points right at me. This is the face of a merchant running profit calculations in his head.

I mumble something to myself about counting chickens before they hatch, reaching up to rub at my temple.

“Mister Benno,” I sigh, “it’s really easy to say ‘give it a shot’, but that’s going to be all the way in the spring, and I don’t even know if I’ll even be able to leave the house then... wha?!”

Honestly, will I be able to hold out until spring? That’s a risk, right? The instant the thoughts form in my head, the tight seal within me blasts wide open and the white-hot fever of the devouring surges out. It burns within me like a blazing pillar of fire. I can’t surround it and push it back away like usual, and in my brief moments of panicked confusion it roars out, consuming my entire body.

“Oi, Maine!” yells Lutz, noticing this sudden disaster. He stands up, his expression changing in an instant.

I find myself unable to put any real strength into my limbs, and I start to sway dangerously.

With my body burning up from a fever that can’t be pushed away, I’m aware that I’m in the process of falling from my chair, but I can’t manage to stop myself.

It’s only the fact that my field of view suddenly changes that makes me realize I’ve hit the ground. Even though I hit the ground with a heavy thud, the heat raging within my body far surpasses the pain of the impact, and I don’t feel it at all. My eyes, somehow still open, see two sets of feet rush up to me through the thick carpet.

“Maine, are you okay?!”

Lutz grabs my arms to shake me. He instantly lets go, surprised by the

heat, but grabs on even tighter. Benno turns around to face the door, not wasting a moment before ringing the bell to call Mark.

“Shit!” he yells. “Mark, get her to the old man’s right now!”

“Hey!” yells Lutz. “Didn’t you say you were going to make a book?! Didn’t you say you can’t lose yet?! Maine!! Keep it toget...” “Mark, ...urry... ...e prepare...”

Their shouts gradually fade into the distance until I have no idea what they’re saying anymore. Then, with a snap, I lose consciousness.

Chapter 49: Discussing the Devouring With Freida

Engulfed by this fever, I remember that this sensation of being slowly eaten away from the outside in is just like it was before. Just like before, I focus my willpower as best as I can, struggling to somehow push back the fever.

Remembering how I dealt with it the last time it slipped out, I try to wrestle it back into my inner core, but, unlike the last time, it burns far too hot to do so. Although I push and I push, it refuses to budge a single inch.

You're in my way! Get back! There's no way I'm going to die like this!

As I flail stubbornly at the fever weighing down on me, suddenly, it starts to be pulled away in some direction. Just like a mound of dirt in a vacuum cleaner commercial, the fever surrounding me is sucked away with a roar.

Yeah! Get the hell out!

I shove more of the fever at the vacuum cleaner as it steadily sucks away. I'm thrilled at how quickly my fever is going down, so I throw glob after glob at it, but then suddenly, from somewhere, I hear something burst open with a loud bang. In that instant, the fever abruptly stops flowing away, and no matter how hard I throw, it just comes back.

Huh? Did the vacuum cleaner... break?

I suddenly realize that maybe I was the one to break it, having gotten carried away at cramming things into it.

...Did I just do something awful? What do I do now?

I drift lazily about in the much-reduced clouds of fever for a while, completely confused. Of course, there's nobody around me at all, let alone anyone I can actually ask for an explanation.

It looks like I've been saved, so let's think about the rest of it later.

Now that the raw heat of the fever has finally gone down, I immediately work to put it away. There's only about half of it remaining, so, unlike

before, I can gather it up in my core and seal it away without any particular difficulty. I cram it away into the depths of my heart like shoving old cardboard boxes into a closet and shut the door tightly behind it. Basking in the triumph of finally finishing this job, I feel my consciousness gradually start floating to the surface.

When I open my eyes, I'm once again in a completely unfamiliar world. No, seriously. Although fighting against the devouring has left my body completely and utterly exhausted, my mind is as clear as it's ever been. This isn't a dream.

Where am I?

First off, it's dark. My first thought is that it's because the sun's gone down, but on closer examination it's more that the area around my head is dark. There's a little more light down by my feet. So, once I take another look around to confirm what I'm seeing, I now understand that the ceiling, or, rather, the thick green cloth that covers most of my field of view, hangs down around the entire bed. The part of it at my feet has a separation running along it, looking like it could be opened like a curtain.

This cloth is not the fluttery lace canopy around a fairy-tale princess's bed, but a thick, heavy canopy designed to completely block out vision. Only rich people can afford to use cloth like this.

Wait, maybe, did I get reincarnated as a noble this time?!

The bed itself is completely different from my own. Unlike the straw mattress I usually sleep on, warm woolen sheets have been filled with something soft and cozy, like a thick, warm futon¹. The texture is excellent, and it feels like it would be amazing to sleep in.

Back in my Urano days, I had a spring mattress with a quilted top and some very high-quality blankets, but this last year has completely reconfigured my views of what a bed feels like. As I'm lying here, the mattress isn't rustling beneath me, nor is the pillow beneath my head as I'm looking around. There is no straw poking itchily at me through the sheets, either. This feels rather strange.

Straw mattresses can be warm, too. Once you get used to them, you can

even sleep through being bitten by the ticks and the mites. Yep, once you get used to them. Oooh, it's been so long since I've been on a mattress this good. I just want to sleep a little longer like this.

The bed I share with Tory is so small that I have to take great care when I'm turning over in your sleep, but this bed is big enough that I can roll around and around with no problems at all. As I'm rolling around, I notice that there's a chair and a small nightstand next to the desk, with a candlestick whose light has long since burned out. None of these things are anything that I've ever seen before.

However, as I'm rolling around, something very familiar enters my field of view: my own hands and my own hair. I stretch my hands in front of me and pull my hair in front of my face, verifying that I have not, in fact, turned into someone who is not Maine.

...So I haven't reincarnated again, then. So, really, where am I?

I dig through my memories, trying to remember what happened to me right before I lost consciousness. Now that I'm thinking about it, I do remember Benno saying something about contacting the guild leader, I think.

“...Ah, so, maybe this is the guild leader's house?”

I think I remember hearing that the guild leader had a magic tool that could do something about the devouring, so this is almost certainly the guild leader's house. The level of wealth here supports that theory, too.

“Excuse me,” I call out, “is anyone there?”

My body is still so heavy that I really don't want to get up, but I should get a good grasp of the situation. From the edge of the bed, I slowly reach out my hand, pulling slightly on the hanging, curtain-like cloth. Soon, an unfamiliar person slips through the curtain, perhaps having heard my voice.

“Uh, ummm...” I stall. “One moment, please, ma'am.”

“Huh? S... sure.”

Although I have no idea what's going on, I still can't move. I wrap myself in the blanket, and as I grow warmer, my eyelids start to droop.

Oh, no, I'm getting sleepy again.

When I start nodding off, I hear the sound of a door opening and closing, then the approach of soft footsteps. Just like a student hearing the teacher's footsteps when dozing off in class, I'm instantly wide awake.

"Maine, are you awake?"

The curtains part, revealing a girl with pink pigtails. She steps inside the canopy, bringing a lit candle with her.

"...Oh? Freida?"

"Yes, it is I. How much of what happened to you might you remember, I wonder?"

She sets the candle on the nightstand and seats herself on the chair next to the bedside. Since it seems we're about to have a conversation, I start trying to sit up as well, but Freida reaches out to stop me.

"The fever this time took quite a toll on your body. I don't mind if you lie down."

"Thanks, Freida. Although, if I'm lying down like this while we're talking, I think I might fall asleep, so..."

I move my body, pushing myself up into a sitting position. Freida, with a wry smile, reminds me not to overdo it.

"Ummm, what happened to me, huh? Well, I only really remember as much as when I was in Mister Benno's shop, then the devouring came up and swallowed me. ...Then I remember that there was way too much of it for me to deal with by myself, but it got sucked away somewhere, so... Freida, did you do something to help?"

I've never experienced anything like that fever vanishing the way that it did. I think that what probably happened was that someone used a magic tool, like Benno said... and then while that was happening I broke the extremely expensive tool.

The blood instantly drains from my face. In contrast, though, Freida gently nods her head.

“That’s essentially correct. We crammed as much of it as we could fit inside a magic tool that was just about to break. It broke partway through, but I think your devouring fever must be very much lessened. How do you feel?”

“Yeah, much better. Although, I heard magic tools are really expensive...”

Although my face is ghastly pale, Freida smiles again, looking amused as she tells me just how much it costs.

“That’s right. The one that broke just now was two small gold coins and eight large silver. Mister Benno said that you would pay for it, but, can you really, I wonder?”

I can’t help but think that Benno, when buying that additional information about rinsham from me, already knew how much this was going to cost. It would be a little bit too conveniently exact, if that wasn’t the case.

...Huh? Didn’t he open up his bid at two small gold coins, not three? If I hadn’t made him go higher, then...

Feeling a little weird about that inconsistency, I nod towards Freida.

“...I can pay.”

“You really do have that much, huh... I underestimated you, Maine!”

Freida’s eyes momentarily shine with amazement, but then she starts to sulk a little, her cheeks puffing out.

“If you couldn’t pay, he was saying that you’d sign up to work at my shop. Grandfather said that he’d told Mister Benno that the tool would cost one small gold and two large silver coins, so I thought you definitely wouldn’t have enough. It seems that Mister Benno is one step ahead of me!”

Good job, me, turning down that two-gold offer! Also, Benno, excellent call on raising your offer at the last minute! Working at the kind of shop

that would try to trap people by misrepresenting the price of life-saving magical tools would give me ulcers!

As I breathe a sign of relief, Freida looks at me, her lips pointed.

“What that magic tool did... to use a metaphor, if you had a cup that was overflowing with water, it siphoned off some of the excess. There’s still water left in the cup, and as you keep growing, it’s only going to keep filling back up. Do you understand, I wonder?”

“Yes.”

There was more half a year ago than a year ago, more last month than half a year ago, and more just now than last month. The devouring fever steadily became harder and harder to handle, and it’s only become manageable now thanks to the magic tool absorbing some of it. There’s a lot less of it now, but it’s only going to start building back up again. I’m more than well aware of this fact.

“The troubling part is that the rate at which the cup fills is faster than the rate at which it grows bigger. So, you probably don’t have any more than a year before it fills up again, I think.”

Since Freida has the same devouring I do, I know that she’s telling the truth, and I nod my understanding. Freida makes a visible effort to put all the emotion from her face, and speaks with forced indifference.

“So, Maine. You need to choose. Will you enslave yourself to a nobleman, or live with your family until you rot away?”

“Huh?”

I blink in disbelief, and a troubled smile flickers across Freida’s face.

“Magic tools are, fundamentally, the possessions of noble families. My grandfather knew about my devouring and spent a lot of money to buy nearly-broken magical tools that the nobility consider worthless, so my family now has a few, but I think that even if you were to look very hard, there wouldn’t be any more out there.”

“Whaaaaaat?! A broken, worthless thing is two small gold and two large

silver?!”

My eyes go completely wide with shock. Freida stares at me for a moment, blinking a few times, then slowly tilts her head to the side.

“That’s a small price to pay for your own life, is it not? A properly-functioning magic tool is something you buy with large gold coins. If a commoner with the devouring wants to live, they need to make a contract with a nobleman to work solely for their sake, buy the tool, and then work for the rest of their lives to pay off that debt.”

Freida looks at me like this is the most obvious thing in the world as she explains it to me, and I realize that this must be an explanation that she herself has been told many, many times.

“...Freida, does that mean that you...”

When I ask her if she’s also going to enter in a contract with a nobleman to buy a magic tool, she suddenly smiles brightly, like a flower blooming.

“That’s right,” she says, nodding. “I’ve already made a contract with a nobleman. He’ll let me continue living here until I’m 15, when I’m an adult. Then, when my coming-of-age ceremony is complete, we’ve agreed that I’ll become his concubine.”

“What?! H, h-hi-his, concubine?! Do you know what that word you’re saying means?!”

I cannot possibly believe that a word like that could have come out of the mouth of a sweet, adorable little girl like Freida. My mouth flaps open and closed, speechless, but Freida, strangely, looks at me in astonishment.

“...From that reaction, Maine, you know what a concubine is?”

“I mean, a concubine... a concubine...”

This is not a word that a six-or seven-year old child should know. On top of that, not only does she know what it means, she is perfectly okay with knowing that she’ll become one. This can’t be happening.

“There was talk about being his second or third wife, but they said that if I were to be his official wife then things like the line of succession and the

order of precedence amongst his other wives would become quite complicated. In particular, since our family has more money than many lower-ranked noble families, the chances are quite high that me marrying a nobleman might cause quite a lot of unnecessary strife. That's what my grandfather told me."

"Eeeeeeeek?! Guild leader!" I unintentionally shout out loud. "What are you saying around kids?!"

Freida's facial expression hardens, and she looks at me sternly.

"Maine, don't think that this is not your problem too. If you choose to live, then you will have to live in the world of the nobility. Unless you're skilled at social maneuvering, even if you gain a magic tool there are still many other reasons you could be killed. Information is key if you want to protect yourself. If he'd hidden that from me, I would have been in danger, you know?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

As usual, I'd let my stupidly peaceful Japanese thought process slip, and it seems like she didn't miss it at all. This is not the lukewarm world I had so peacefully lived in.

Freida smiles wryly at me as I apologize.

"Don't worry about it. My particular case is rather unusual. My grandfather is the guild leader, and very many members of the nobility do business with him, you know? There are those who wish to develop closer ties to my family, and there are those who seek our help, so we were able to select conditions that were the most favorable to both myself and my family."

"When you say conditions, you mean...?"

Somehow swept along, I tilt my head curiously to the side and ask my question. Freida gives me a look that seems to praise me for actually following along, then opens her mouth to reply.

"I'll be able to get a shop in the nobles' quarter. This won't just be me being given the first floor of my patron's residence or a detached room on

the property, I'd get my very own shop. The startup fees and living expenses would be provided by my family, but this will be the same thing as establishing a branch of our store in the nobles' quarter directly. We'll be able to start up the kind of trade we had to abandon due to the devouring. I'm really looking forward to it!"

Freida smiles brightly, her eyes glittering. Her entire posture conveys just how much she's looking forward to her gleaming future. I, however, am confused.

"I... see. Have you thought at all about marrying someone you love, instead?"

"Now, Maine, what are you talking about? No matter what kind of life you live, marriage is decided by your father, is it not? There are cases where you might pick between a few suiters, but it's always the case that the man you marry will be decided for you." "Ah... you're right."

Argh, my common sense is really a lack of common sense in this world. Now that she mentions it, one's spouse really is decided by one's father. It's a relationship between two families.

"So, my family will be able to establish a permanent location in the nobles' quarter, and even though my patron will take thirty percent of my sales I'll be owning my own shop, and since I'll have some physical distance between myself and my patron I'll be able to escape the more troubling things, so I think these are quite favorable conditions for me."

Watching Freida talk about becoming a concubine while wearing such a dazzlingly cute smile, I am once again reminded of just how much my own intuition differs from that of this world. My feelings right now are complex.

"Although, Maine," she continues, "you don't seem to have anything to offer a nobleman, do you? I thought you'd be quite envious of my situation when I told you about me becoming a concubine. Think about it, Maine, and try to live a life that you won't come to regret."

Ahh, I see. Since I have the devouring as well, if I want to live, I'll need to find the patronage of a nobleman, too. So, what she's telling me is that

before the next time I'm overwhelmed by the devouring I should think about what I plan to do with myself in the future.

Do I plan on forever indebting myself to a nobleman, or do I die surrounded by my family?

"Thanks, Freida. I'll think about what I should do. I'm glad you told me all of this."

"Certainly; you don't have anyone else in your life that could tell you of these things, correct? If you're ever worried about the devouring, please come talk to me. We're the only ones who can really understand each other about what's happening to us."

Since the devouring is such a rare disease, it's similarly rare to find someone who knows about it. It's extremely reassuring to know that there's someone I can talk to about it.

"I'm grateful for the offer, thank you," I reply. "I should probably go home now."

I've realized that the room is gradually growing darker and darker. The sun will probably be setting soon, I think. I need to return home as soon as I can, or my family will be worried about me. Since our conversation is finished, I move to get down from the bed, but Freida pushes me back down.

"It's okay, your family already knows you're here. Please keep resting."

"Huh?" "They were here again earlier today." "Again...? How long was I unconscious?"

I was not expecting it to be a totally different day. As my eyes go wide, Freida puts a hand to her cheek, tilting her head thoughtfully to the side.

"You were carried here shortly before lunch yesterday, and today the sun is already setting. It seems that you're still very exhausted, and it seems like it took you a very long time to wake up even after your fever went down. Even though your fever's already gone down, it's been decided that you'll stay here, just to make sure you're okay, until after the baptismal ceremony the day after tomorrow."

It looks like a lot of things happened without me knowing about them. Even just thinking about what my family must have felt when they were told what happened to me makes my stomach ache.

“Lutz, I believe, will be coming here tomorrow morning, and I think your family might come along too. So it is okay to close your eyes again and rest for now, Maine.”

“Thanks, Freida.” “Before you talk with your family tomorrow, please think hard about your own opinions. ...Now, tomorrow, if you’re feeling up for it, how about we make sweets together, like we promised?”

Freida stands up, her chair clattering behind her, and picks up her candle, then quietly walks away out of my field of view. I start to ruminate about what she’d told me, my thoughts going between various possibilities, but my body still craves more rest, so even though I’m still sitting up my eyelids start to droop. I squirm my way back under the covers, unable to resist the snug comfort of this bed, and I go out light a light.

Chapter 50: Making Cakes With Freida

The next morning, I leave the bed for the first time and get a look at the rest of the room.

The room is over four meters long on each side. In one corner sits the canopy bed, but there's also a round table, three chairs, and a fireplace. In addition to the simple furnishings, though, the floor is covered in a thick carpet and curtains are swaying in a window whose glass has a rippling, undulating design, as if to stop people outside from looking in. It may be a simple room, but it is very obviously one that a lot of money was spent on.

Also, near a chair by the door, there is already a servant woman waiting for me.

"Good morning. Please, wash your face here. When you are dressed, I will lead you to the dining room."

"A... alright."

She briskly prepares a bowl of hot water for me to wash my face in and hands me a clean cloth. I'm a little nervous at being treated so graciously.

"Please, change into these close. This may be rude of me to say, ma'am, but it would be troublesome for you to be seen in this house in your own attire."

"I understand."

The clothes that she produces look like Freida's old clothes. At the sight of them, however, my heart jumps for joy, seeing that they aren't extremely worn and constantly patched together like mine are. I quickly comb out my hair as well and do it up with my hairpin. The servant looks at my hairpin curiously, but doesn't say a thing. With that, my preparations are complete.

I'm led to the dining room, where Freida and the guild leader are already waiting for me. I realize that I haven't yet thanked the guild leader for helping me out.

"Good morning, guild leader. I am very grateful for all of your

assistance.”

The guild leader nods slightly in reply. Freida quickly rushes over to me, then pats me on my forehead and the nape of my neck. I flinch when I feel her slightly cool hands on my skin, but she doesn't seem to care.

“Good morning, Maine! It looks like your fever's gone totally away, doesn't it?”

“Good morning, Freida. I'm doing great! I'm feeling very refreshed.”

Ah, was she feeling my temperature? Now that I actually understand the reason behind her sudden action, I give her a cheerful smile. She smiles happily back at me, and we both turn towards the dining table.

The guild leader harrumphs. “It's good to see that you're doing well, but this is all the help you're going to get with the magic tools. I bought these so that they'd be ready if something happens to Frieda, after all.”

“Grandpa!” objects Freida. “It's just like he says, Freida,” I say to her. “They're things he collected for your sake.” I turn to the guild leader. “Sir, I am deeply grateful that you sold me such a valuable magic tool. Thank you.”

It was an extremely precious thing that he'd had to use his connections and money to their maximum extent to acquire. Even though I'll be paying him back financially, it was amazingly good fortune that he sold it to me in the first place.

“Maine,” he says, “think hard about what you'll be doing after this.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply. “Now then, we should send word to your family that you're awake. I'll send a messenger; is there anything you'd like to tell them?”

I'm a little startled when he mentions sending a messenger, but I realize that there's no way that the guild leader would walk to my house himself. Sending a messenger is only normal for him. He calls over a young man, who confirms with me where my house is.

“Umm,” I say, “Could you ask them if they could bring some ‘simple

shampoo and conditioner' with them as a thank-you gift for Freida, please?"

We still call it simple shampoo and conditioner at my house, but it really doesn't seem to be the kind of name that you can immediately remember after hearing it just once. The messenger's face is strained as he tries hard to remember exactly what my message is.

"Sim-pull sham...? Um, I'm terribly sorry, but might I ask you to repeat that for me?"

"Ummm, if you tell them to bring the liquid that makes hair shiny, I think they'll understand. I'm sorry to have to trouble you with this, but thank you very much for your effort." "Liquid to make hair shiny. I understand, ma'am."

As I see the messenger off, I notice that the guild leader is looking at me intently, stroking his chin. For some reason, I suddenly feel like he'd had a disturbing sort of smile on his face as he was watching me just a moment ago.

"You certainly do have some interesting things, Maine," he remarks. "That's right, Grandpa," says Freida. "I thought for sure we'd get her in exchange for that magic tool, but now I'm really disappointed we didn't."

With neither Benno nor Lutz here, the thought of getting cornered by these two is terrifying. They'd swallow me whole in the blink of an eye.

"The money for the magic tool!" I exclaim. "Let me pay you for that."

I'd be in trouble if I got overcharged for some reason or another, or if the price suddenly raised on me, so I immediately touch my guild card to the guild leader's, completing the transaction.

"You really did have that much... Benno," he grumbles, vexed.

Somehow, Benno managed to dodge his way through the net the guild leader had laid out to snare him.

Good job, Mister Benno!

"Maine, please eat as much as you like."

“Don’t mind if I do!”

It’s hard to keep my face from shining. I mean, the bread they brought out for breakfast is white bread! Real, white bread, made only with flour! On top of that, I can use as much honey as I like; isn’t this too luxurious? After stuffing my face full of sweet, delicious bread, I reach for the soup.

The soup is pleasantly salty, but I feel like all of the savoriness of the vegetables has escaped. It seems that, as expected, once they boiled the vegetables to completion they just threw out the leftover broth. This seems to be a pretty well-established practice in the culinary arts around here. The bacon and eggs are amazingly delicious, and for dessert they bring out a selection of fruits.

I’m deeply moved by this luxurious breakfast. It’s like something I could have gotten in Japan. The breakfasts of the rich sure are delicious. As I enthusiastically chow down, the guild leader looks at me with a frown.

“Maine, who taught you your manners?”

“I wasn’t really taught, I don’t think?”

I’m not technically lying: I’d dug out books on manners and gone to family restaurants to practice them, but I was never actually formally taught manners. The guild leader, however, only frowns more deeply, looking at me with naked curiosity written all over his face. I, however, don’t pay him any mind as I finish my breakfast. If I let it bother me, I lose.

Shortly after breakfast is finished, the guild leader heads off to work. As Freida and I rest, we’re notified that guests have arrived. It seems that my family has stopped by to see me on their way to work.

“Maine!” says my father, leaping into the room with outstretched arms. My mother shoves him aside. “Whargh?!”

“You’re awake!” she says. “I’m so glad. When Lutz told me that you’d collapsed in Mister Benno’s store and had to be carried to Miss Freida’s home, I thought my heart was going to stop.”

“I’m sorry to make you worry,” I reply. “Freida has the same sickness I

do, so she knows a lot of things about it that I didn't."

There is no way I could tell her outright that I just spent two small gold and eight large silver coins to use a magic tool. She's faint on the spot.

"Miss Freida," she says, "thank you so very much."

"Mommy," I say, "did you bring the 'simple shampoo and conditioner' to thank Freida with?"

I couldn't really think of anything else to thank her with besides money, but since her baptismal ceremony is tomorrow, I think this is excellent timing for making her hair sparklingly clean.

"We did. I don't know whether or not something like this is a good thank-you, though. Tory?"

"Thank you for helping Maine, Miss Freida," says Tory, handing Freida a small jar. Freida takes it with a smile, bending slightly at the waist. "You are very welcome." "We really are very grateful," says my father. "Lutz told us that Maine was in a very serious condition. Thank you very much for saving my daughter." He turns to me. "Maine, you seem to be doing better; will you come home today?"

His eyes convey that he wants me to return home immediately. Since my family is already worried, I personally want to return home as soon as it looks like I can, but Freida stands in my way, smiling.

"No, as we discussed earlier, Maine will be staying here until the day of the baptismal ceremonies so that we can keep an eye on her condition. I would be deeply troubled if she suddenly got worse."

"...Ah, right," says my father reluctantly. "We're sorry for the trouble," says my mother, turning to face Freida and bending slightly at the waist, "but please take care of Maine."

As I wonder if this is some sort of greeting, I lean a little bit closer to get a better look, but Tory reaches out with both hands and grabs me firmly by the cheeks.

"We're going to work now. Make sure you don't act up like you usually

do, okay?”

“Alright, Tory. Come pick me up on baptism day! Good luck at work!”

My family rushes out, looking like they’re in a bit of a hurry, passing Lutz, who is just arriving, on their way out.

“You’re awake! How’s your fever? Has it really gone down?”

Just like Freida had done this morning, Lutz pats my forehead and the nape of my neck, checking my temperature. Since he just came in from outside, though, his hands are freezing cold compared to Freida’s, and I let out a yelp.

“Wait, Lutz! Your hands are cold!”

“Oops, sorry.” “Sorry I made you worry. I’m okay now, though.” “...You’ll be okay for about a year, right?”

Lutz’s lips are pursed, silently saying that we can’t celebrate just yet. However, the fact that we put this off another year is itself momentous.

“Yeah. ...I’ll use that time to think about a lot of things, and try looking to see if there really isn’t something we can do about it. First off, I have to make a book.”

“That’s all you ever think about! Well, I’m going to go tell Master Benno that you’re awake. He said yesterday that he’d come to check in on you later this afternoon.”

When Benno’s name comes up, Freida suddenly scowls. She’d taken a step back at some point, but now that she’s heard that she steps forward to muscle her way in.

“Oh dear, this afternoon would be a problem. Maine and I promised each other that we’d spend the afternoon making sweets! Isn’t that right, Maine?”

Somehow, I get the feeling that it wouldn’t be that good an idea to let Benno and Freida meet. I can’t help but get an awful premonition that I’d wind up awkwardly sitting between the two of them as they glare at each other, caught between a rock and a hard place.

“So, Lutz, I’m sorry, but if you say you’re going to Mister Benno’s shop, could you tell him that as well?”

“Yeah, sure... but what are you making? Something new?”

Lutz, of course, finds the talk of my promise to make sweets with Freida far more interesting than whatever he has to do with Benno.

I shake my head, chuckling. “I can’t decide on what we’re making until I’ve talked with the person who does the cooking here.”

“Oh my,” says Freida, “you haven’t decided yet?”

Until I know what kinds of ingredients and tools I can use, I can’t really come up with any solid ideas about what we’ll make. Also, if the cook is a cooperative sort of person, we’d be able to make something that might take a while to do so. If they’re only just putting up with us, though, I’d prefer to make something a little simpler.

“I have no idea what kinds of ingredients or tools we can use, so I can’t decide yet.”

“You could make things with Lutz, though, right?”

Freida purses her lips, looking as if she doesn’t understand my explanation. Since Lutz’s lifestyle is similar to mine, the tools and ingredients that he has at his house aren’t going to be vastly different from those at mine, but since Freida’s house is so vastly different, I can’t really even compare the two of them together at all.

“I only really tell people how to cook. At Lutz’s house, I use his family’s ingredients, and he and his brothers help out a lot. Right, Lutz?”

“Yeah, since you don’t have any strength, and you don’t have any endurance, and you still haven’t grown up.” “I think we’ll be done this evening, so I think we can save a bit for you to sample, you know?”

“Seriously?! I’m looking forward to it!”

Freida seems to be burning with some sort of sense of rivalry with Lutz, and after she scowlingly watches him walk out the door, she turns to me, cheeks puffed out in the most adorable sulk.

“You’re too nice to him.”

“Oh, no, not at all. It’s the opposite. He’s way too nice to me.”

At those words, Freida only sulks even harder. To be honest, I have absolutely no idea why she might possibly be doing this.

Freida suddenly points directly at my face. “Alright! Then I’m going to be way too nice to you too!”

“Huh? Why?” “Well, you’re my number one best friend, but I’m not your number one best friend, and that’s not okay!”

What an adorable creature. I want to mush up her little cheeks.

“Well, would it make you feel better if we did all the girls-only things I can’t do with Lutz, then?”

“Girls-only things?”

I start thinking about all the things I enjoy chattering with Tory while doing. Freida’s hobby is money. Playing with dolls like a normal girl is probably outside her norm. That might still be fun, but apart from that, there’s not whole lot of things we could do to spend time playing.

“Like, taking baths together and wash each other’s hair, or just lazing around on the bed and chatting about things, you know, things only girls can do with each other?”

“Why, that sounds wonderful! Well, to start, let’s go see the cook about making this sweets, okay?”

Freida grabs my hand and pulls me along towards the kitchen. There, I see a slightly chubby older woman who looks to have just finished tidying up after breakfast. She looks to be around the same age as my mother, and her demeanor seems to be much like Lutz’s mother, Auntie Carla’s.

“Ilse, Ilse,” says Freida. “About the sweets we’re going to be making today...”

“Yes, yes, young lady,” she replies. “You’re going to make them with your friend? You’ve told me about this very many times by now.” “What kind of ingredients might we be able to use?” I ask. Ilse’s raises her eyebrows the

tinest bit. “When you say ingredients, just what are you planning to use?” “Ummm, basically, flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. We don’t have sugar at my house, so we use jam or honey, but if I might ask, do you have any here?”

Depending on your tools and ingredients, there’s a huge difference in the kinds of sweets that you can make. There’s a very good reason behind the fact that all I’ve been able to make at Lutz’s house has been pancakes and french toast.

“Yes, we have sugar.”

“Really?! Amazing! Um, uh, then, do you have an oven?” “We do. Do you see it over there?”

Ilse shifts slightly to one side, and I can see a large wood-fired oven behind her. My heart quickly fills with ever-increasing expectation. I clasp my hands tightly together in front of my chest, looking eagerly up at Ilse.

“Since you’ve got an oven, you’ve got pots and pans that you can use in an oven, right?”

“Of course we do.” “And scales?” “That’s right.”

Ilse shrugs her shoulders as if I’m asking the most obvious things in the world; I, however, jump for joy.

“Woohoo! We can bake a ‘cake’!”

Recipe after recipe bubbles up through my brain. Of course, these are recipes that I know the various ingredient quantities for.

Huh? But... even though I remember the recipes, I don’t actually know how to translate grams into this world’s units of weight. What do I do now?²

Since I’ve been focusing so hard on the thought of making sweets, this completely slipped my mind, but you need more than just ingredients and tools to make sweets. If you don’t get the amounts of each ingredient just right, it’ll end up a failure.

When I was making parucakes at Lutz’s house, I did it all by intuition,

which meant that the puffiness and thickness varied every time. Since my audience was boys who didn't actually care about anything except quantity, I managed to pull it off, but if I want to make something in earnest, I need precise measurements.

Isn't there anything I can do? Some sort of sweet that I can make without being able to measure things in grams...

I try to recall any recipes that I can make without knowing the measurements, and come up with something that fits exactly from a book I read on French cuisine.

"Ummm, I think we should make a kind of sweet called a 'pound cake'."

Pound cake, or quatre-quarts in French, is a cake made with equal quantities of flour, eggs, butter, and sugar. If we make pound cake, then it doesn't actually matter what the actual weight of the ingredients are. All we have to do is measure the same amount on the scale.

"I haven't heard of it," says Ilse. "What kind of sweet is that?"

"It's a sweet that you put equal amounts of flour, eggs, butter, and sugar into." "You really want to make something like that?"

Ilse looks at me with startled eyes. I flinch a little bit, then walk back my previous remarks.

"...If that's not okay then we can make something else?"

"It's not that it's not okay, but do you really know how to make something like that?" "Yes!"

I get her to promise to make sure the oven is ready by the time we're ready to make sweets, and then Freida and I withdraw from the kitchen. After that, we start looking for some aprons for the two of us. Freida, who has never helped around the house in her life, seems to have never worn an apron before. One of the female servants digs some out and offers them to us, asking if they're what we're looking for. We put them on, and then cover our hair with large handkerchiefs folded into triangles.

When the time we promised to start cooking comes around, we head to

the kitchen, where Ilse is there. She looks down at us, a mirthful twinkle in her eye.

“Oh my, young lady,” she says to Freida. “You look quite fired up!”

“That’s right. I will be helping make it as well!”

Unfortunately, we don’t have a cake pan, so instead we find a small iron pot to use instead. Then, we get to work.

“So, how about you start by explaining how to make this?” asks Ilse. “If I don’t understand the process from start to finish I won’t be able to make it.”

“Of course,” I reply. “First, we need to measure out the ingredients. Then, we need to warm the eggs up to about body temperature and then whip them together with the sugar.” “How should we warm up the eggs?”

“Umm, we could fill up a bigger bowl with hot water and put the bowl with the eggs in there.” “Ah, a water bath. Then, before we measure the ingredients, we need to heat up the water first.”

Unlike with a gas stove, we can’t actually boil water immediately. This is really obvious, but since I haven’t seriously made a cake before, there are absolutely going to be trivial details that I just won’t notice.

“Whipping the eggs and sugar together is the most important part. Once they’re whipped until they stand, then we slowly cut in sifted flour. Then, we add melted butter, but very carefully to avoid ruining the eggs.”

“We’ll need to melt the butter too. Once everything’s mixed, then we bake it?” “That’s right.”

Ilse, who seems to have understood the directions, takes out a scale and places it on the prep counter. Then, she starts giving us directions on how to measure out the ingredients, which have already been lined up for me. While Freida instructs us on the use of the scale, Freida and I measure out equal quantities of each ingredient. Meanwhile, Ilse starts heating up the water.

First, we measure out the eggs and the sugar, then warm them up in the hot water. When they get up to body temperature, Ilse devotes herself to

whipping them together. How frothy they are will have a big difference on the cake's fluffiness and flavor. As she does this, Freida and I measure out the flour and butter.

"This should be perfect," says Ilse. "Let's coat the inside of the pan with butter now."

"Why?" "It's so that we can make sure it's easy to take the cake out of the pan."

We smear butter all around the inside of the pot, then lightly dust it with flour. Since we have neither a cake pan nor anything to use as parchment paper, we don't have a choice.

"Next, should we sift the flour?"

We start sifting the flour, taking care not to send it flying everywhere. We sift it three times in total, since it's really important that it be full of air.

"Oh my," says Freida, "the eggs were yellow, but now they're white, and they've grown quite a bit in size."

As Ilse whips the eggs, her whisk clattering against the bowl, Freida looks at her with some sort of envy. It's really obvious that she wants to help with the whipping, so Ilse laughingly offers the bowl and the whisk to her.

"Want to try?"

"I do!"

She happily starts whipping the eggs, but very quickly hands the bowl back. Without a hand mixer, making a cake is a very strenuous process.

"How does this look?" asks Ilse, showing me the bowl of whipped eggs and sugar. "Perfect! Now we add the flour."

We set the sifter once again on top of the bowl and slowly add the flour. Using a wooden spatula, I cut the flour into the eggs and sugar.

"We'll mix it like this. Next will be the butter. Is it melting?"

“That’s right,” says Ilse, “after we warmed up the water I put the butter next to the stove.” “Miss Ilse, please switch with me. My arms are really tired...” “Good grief,” she laughs. “Neither of you two young ladies has any strength.”

Smiling, she switches with me. We add the butter to the dough in much the same way, then mix it together. Freida brings the pot we’re using as our cake pan over, then looks on with gleaming eyes.

“While we’re pouring it in, we need to hit the pan like this so that we don’t have any bubbles.”

Since the pot is so heavy, I leave it to Ilse. Ever since the start of this process it seems that she didn’t think Freida and I could actually do this, so she helpfully follows along with my instructions.

“Now, once it bakes in the oven, it’ll be all finished.”

Since I don’t really know how to use a wood-fired oven, I think leaving that to Ilse is the best idea. When she opens the oven, a blast of heat roars out. She quickly puts the cake batter inside, then closes the door with a clank.

“I think it’ll be done by the time we finish cleaning up,” I say.

We try to help Ilse out as she briskly moves through the kitchen, tidying things up, but wind up caught halfway between help and hindrance. Freida, who can’t stop expectantly fidgeting, looks very cute.

“Is it done yet, I wonder?”

“Not yet,” I reply.

Ah, now that I think about it, there aren’t any bamboo skewers in this world, are there? How the heck am I going to check to see if it’s done?

*

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. The room is described as bigger than an 8-tatami mat room, which is approximately 3.6m square. I’ve rounded up to preserve the feel of the estimate.

2. Recipes in Japan (actually, outside the US) are generally measured in terms of weight and not volume, so instead of a recipe calling for a cup of flour it would call for 120 grams.

Chapter 51: Taking a Bath With Freida

“Maine, is it done yet?”

“How about we take a look?”

Ilse cracks open the oven, and I peer inside. I can see that it’s puffing up quite nicely, but the back part of the cake seems to have browned more than the front.

“Miss Ilse, it looks like the back part is pretty well baked, so could you please turn it around?”

“Sure,” she replies.

She pushes the cake pan around in the oven, rotating it. Even if I were wearing the same sort of thick mittens she is, I definitely wouldn’t want to stick my hands into that blazing oven. I’m impressed by the kinds of things professional cooks get used to.

Ilse shuts the oven door with a clack, then looks down at me. “How do you tell when it’s done baking?” she asks. “Ummm, I’d usually check on it by sticking in something like a bamboo skewer; do you have any sort of long, thin rod with a pointy tip?”

“Hmm, the first thing that comes to mind is the skewers we use for grilling meat.”

After rummaging about for a little bit, she produces iron skewers, like you might stick vegetables or meat on at a barbecue. I’ve never seen anyone use iron skewers to check cake before, but, honestly, the only way to find out whether or not it’ll work is to try it.

...These are going to leave behind some pretty big holes, but since I don’t have any bamboo skewers, I don’t have much of a choice, do I?

In the past, when I didn’t have any bamboo skewers I used a cooking chopstick, so I think it’ll probably be okay. Ilse quickly sticks the skewer into the cake. When she pulls it out and shows it to me, I can see that a bit of uncooked batter still clings to the rod.

“It looks like the inside’s not cooked yet.”

“How can you tell that?” “See how some batter’s stuck to the skewer? When it comes out totally clean, that’s the sign it’s done.”

By the time the inside is fully cooked through, the top of the cake is starting to turn a fairly dark brown. I think the oven might be a little too hot. However, unlike the ovens I’ve used before, it’s not easy to precisely control the actual temperature, so all I can do is entrust this to the experience of this trained worker.

“Hmm, I’ll need to watch the oven more closely next time,” murmurs Ilse.

She pulls the pound cake out of the oven. Once it’s removed from its pan, it’s revealed to be a fluffy, round, almost sponge cake-like cake.

“Amazing!” exclaims Freida. “Yeah,” says Ilse, “this looks quite delicious.”

As the two of them look at the finished pound cake with glittering eyes, an indescribable feeling of accomplishment wells up in my chest.

“It’ll be really delicious if we cover it with a firmly wrung-out wet cloth so it doesn’t dry out and then just let it sit for a couple of days, but how about we taste just a little bit right now?”

I ask Ilse to cut out a very slender slice from it, which I pick up with my fingertips and bring it to my mouth. Eating without a fork like this, before anyone else has been drawn to the kitchen by the smell, is the epitome of the kind of tasting that only those who make the dish can truly appreciate.

“Yeah, this tastes perfect.”

I’ve only ever eaten this when it’s in actual pound-cake shape, but even though it’s just a circle, and even if the cake pan was an iron saucepan, the taste is all right. Ilse, accustomed to tasting things, takes the next little slice and pops it into her mouth.

“Huh, this is...”

Freida had been hesitating a little bit to pick up her own piece, but once

she sees Ilse taste it, she hurriedly puts it in her mouth.

“Well now!”

Their eyes go wide when they taste it, then their heads swivel around to look directly at me. Their expressions look almost predatory, like the guild leader’s did this morning.

...What’s up with this... kinda creepy atmosphere?

It would probably be best if I escape from here before I get asked any awkward questions. I grab onto Freida’s hand.

“Okay then, Freida! Let’s bring this out as a dessert after a meal so that everyone can eat it too. Let’s go take a bath next!”

As we exit the kitchen, I look back over my shoulder, remembering my manners.

“Thank you very much, Miss Ilse!”

The two of us didn’t do very much real work when we were making sweets, but thanks to all of the sifting we did, the cuffs of our sleeves are stained with flour. Since we have more than plenty of time, let’s go use the rinsham and get pretty.

When we exit the kitchen, the female servant who had helped me out earlier this morning is waiting for us.

“You two, before you two go running about, would you kindly take baths?”

“Well now, Yutte,” says Freida, “you’re saying exactly the same thing Maine is.”

Freida chuckles to herself as we walk. Yutte seems to have anticipated that making sweets would get us dirty and has already prepared baths for us. With a basket in hand containing changes of clothes, towels, and the jar full of rinsham, she guides us forward.

“This way, please.”

She starts descending the staircase in the center of the house, but I just

watch warily. At Benno's shop, the staircase in his inner office has a staircase like this one, so I know that it wouldn't be unusual for there to be a staircase leading down into the shop inside a merchant's home. Is it okay for me to walk down there, though? I quietly lean over to ask Freida.

"...Doesn't this staircase go down to the shop?"

"It's okay," she replies.

Yutte passes the door that leads to the shop on the first floor, then goes down another flight of stairs. It seems we're going to some sort of basement room. At the bottom of these stairs are two doors, one very sturdy and splendid, and the other ordinary.

Yutte opens the splendid door, ushering us inside. The floor underneath my feet is warm enough that I want to say that it's got some kind of heating, and the room temperature is fairly high as well. There are two large tables here, covered with cloth, looking entirely like massage tables. (Later, I learn that I'm not at all wrong to think this.)

"Now then, please remove your shoes and clothing."

It seems like this is a combination massage parlor and changing room. Prompted by Yutte, I strip out of the clothes I'm wearing. Freida disrobes as well, with the help of Yutte.

Then, Yutte opens another door, revealing a bathroom that's about three by three-and-a-half meters in size.¹ At the far wall sits an enormous bathtub, as big as a family-sized pool you'd see at a hot spring in Japan, able to comfortably hold two or three people. The wide floor is made out of something that looks at first glance to be white marble, as is the tub, which is filled with gently lapping hot water. Next to the tub is a statue of a young girl holding a pot, and from that pot pours a trickle of hot water. Matching the flow from the statue, a little bit of water runs out of the tub and, heated by that water, the rest of the room is quite warm. The ceiling is tiled, and the windows near the ceiling overflow with brilliant light. Thanks to the room being surrounded by gleaming white marble, the room gives off a very bright atmosphere.

"Whaaat?! What is this?!"

Taken aback by the utterly unexpected appearance of such a grandiose bath, I unintentionally yell out. My voice rings off of the smooth walls. Freida, seeing as how I'm frozen in place, staring through the opened door, chuckles mirthfully, walking past me into the bathroom.

"Heh heh heh, are you surprised? This is a reproduction my grandfather had made of the baths found in the houses of the nobility! It's not something that we use very often, but since tomorrow is my baptismal ceremony, he gave me special permission to use it."

"So, baths... do exist..."

After more than a year without taking a bath, there's now one right before my eyes. On top of that, it's way bigger and more extravagant than Urano's was.

"They originally came from another country, and the nobles believe they they are good for your beauty and bodily health. Oh, just, please be careful, the ground is slippery."

Yutte, still clothed, follows us into the room. Only her apron has changed. It's made of a tough material that looks like it was picked under the assumption that it would get wet, and the skirt portion of it covers her entire lower body. The skirt is rolled up a bit so that it won't get wet, and part of it has been tied off.

Upon entering, she immediately starts washing Freida's hair, prompting me to hurriedly bring out the rinsham.

"Miss Yutte, when you wash her hair, please use this. You, um, pour it on like this..."

I try to explain to her how to use it, but her expression grows slightly troubled and she looks down at Freida.

"Yutte," says Freida, "would it be okay for Maine to wash my hair today?"

"Oh, ummm," I say, "yes, is that alright?"

Yutte surrenders her spot to me, and I start to wash Freida's hair. Meanwhile, she rubs a wet towel against a bar of soap and starts

scrubbing Freida's body.

"When you have a place like this to bath someone in and can use a lot of hot water, you can put the rinsham directly in your hands like this and then apply it to their hair. You need to be careful to use your fingertips when you're washing their scalp so that you don't poke them with your nails."

"It's kinda ticklish," says Freida, "but it feels nice."

Freida's hair is most likely already being maintained by Yutte, I think. It was already smooth before I started, and glossy, too. There might not have been a need to use the rinsham to begin with.

Since there's a high chance that rich people have already established their own styles of cosmetology, I wonder if it might actually be kind of hard to sell rinsham?

I think about things like that as I continue washing Freida's hair. I wonder if I should inform Benno about this.

"Once you've washed all of the hair like this, then you rinse it out. Please take extra care to make sure all of it gets rinsed off of the scalp."

As I say that, Yutte pours a bucketful of water over Freida. When her entire body except for her head has been rinsed off, she quickly walks over to the bathtub and hops in. I stare blankly, wondering what in the world she's doing getting into the tub with shampoo still in her hair², but she rests her head on the edge of the tub, letting her hair hang down. Then, Yutte starts carefully rinsing off the hair that dangles out of the tub.

Oh ho, is that how you wash someone's head? I'm glad I didn't immediately say "oh, I'll rinse you off" and dump a bucket of water on her. That would have been pretty awkward.

In the brief time it takes for me to marvel, wide-eyed, at how rich girls take their baths, Yutte finishes rinsing Freida's hair off. Truly, an environment where you can just splash water everywhere is magnificent.

Now that Freida's all clean, I reach out for the jar of rinsham so that I can wash my own hair. With a splash, Freida jumps out of the tub and

runs up to me, looking at me with brilliant eyes.

“I want to try washing your hair, too!”

“...I can do it myself, though?”

Is it okay for a rich little girl to do something like that?

I quickly glance over at Yutte, silently asking if this is a proper thing to do. She sighs lightly, then comes over to sit down next to me too.

“Well then, young lady, how about you help me? I’d like to practice how to use this ‘rinsham’ as well.”

“Excellent!”

She says she wants practice, but I’m pretty sure she’s really there to fix up any mistakes that Freida might make. Thank you, Yutte.

The two of them wash my hair, big fingertips and little fingertips squirming against my scalp. It’s almost painfully ticklish, but I manage to bear my way through it without bursting into laughter.

“Maine, your hair is so silky smooth,” says Freida. “It’s naturally very straight,” I say, “so it’s really hard to tie it back with a string since it just keeps slipping out. All I can really use to keep it up is my hairpin.”

“It’s a mystery to me how a wooden stick like that can keep hair in place.” “Hmmm, well, it was kind of a last resort, since I couldn’t find anything else nearby that would work...”

When Yutte feels my hair is appropriately washed, she leaves Freida to continue working on that while she starts scrubbing my body. Since I can’t really run away while Freida’s still working on my hair, I have no choice but to sit there and let her do it.

“There, now you’re all clean too,” says Freida.

Freida, who has basically just been ruffling my hair for a while, seems satisfied with her handiwork and pulls back, and I reach for the bucket. However, Yutte quickly snatches it out of the way.

“Now then,” she says, “I’ll rinse your hair out for you, so please get in the

bathtub.”

“B... but I can do it myself?” “You are a guest here, Maine. Please, go right ahead.”

With a smile, she forces me forward, so I get into the tub like Freida had, resting my head on its rim. I let my hair hang down, and Yutte starts carefully rinsing it out. She pours warm water over it, gently shakes it out, and runs her hands along my scalp.

Ahhh, it’s like a spa. This feels good...

I wonder if Yutte always helps Freida take her baths? Her practiced motions are very comfortable; at this rate, I might just drift off again...

“Hey, Maine,” says Freida. “How do you wash your hair when you can’t use a bathroom?”

Freida’s question snaps me back awake in an instant. This is not a spa. I can’t fall asleep here. I look around for her, moving only my eyes, and see that she’s quietly slipped back into the tub next to me, her head resting on the side of the tub in the same pose as I’m in.

I look up, past the steam hanging in the air, at the patterns in the tile mosaic on the ceiling, then start explaining how I usually wash my hair.

“When you don’t have a bathroom, you’d fill a bucket like that one about halfway full of water, then mix the rinsham into that. Then, you soak your hair in the bucket, and wash it in the liquid in there. Then you wipe off your hair over and over with a cloth to make sure no liquid remains, and then you comb it all out.”

You first dilute the rinsham to the point where it should be more-or-less okay if you can’t get it all out of your hair, then you wash it over and over, then you towel it off many, many times to make sure that there’s no rinsham left over. Even this was a last resort, developed when I really wanted to wash my hair but had no access to a bath. If my family had a bathroom, this wouldn’t have been a problem.

“Is rinsham your thing, Maine?”

“No, Mister Benno has all the rights to it. He should be about ready to start selling it soon.” “I see...”

Freida looks like she wants to say something, but before the words can leave her mouth, Yutte stops working on my hair.

“Should be all rinsed out by now, I think?”

“Thank you very much,” I reply, sitting up. “That felt really good.”

Yutte stands up smoothly. “Now then, I’ll be in the other room getting the next things ready. The two of you, please warm yourselves thoroughly.”

“Okay~!”

As soon as Yutte leaves the room, I slump down into the water, all the way past my shoulders. I scoop up some water, splash it over my face, and breathe deeply.

Ahhh... paradise.

“Maine, you look like you’re melting,” says Freida. “But this bath feels so good! It’s so luxurious, being able to stretch out and soak all the way up to my shoulders like this.”

“You’re pleased with it, then?” “Yeah, really!” I reply, my whole face breaking out into a smile as I nod. “I want to take one every day.”

However, I can’t see much of a smile of enjoyment on Freida’s face.

“...Do you not like it, Freida?”

“It’s not that I dislike it, but, it’s very hot, and when I get out my head starts spinning.” “Oh, you’re getting dizzy. You’re staying in too long!”

I answer entirely by reflex, and Freida’s eyes widen.

“Oh really? I was told to warm myself thoroughly, so I’m just staying in as long as I would in a normal bath, though?”

“Well, in a normal bath, the water starts cooling off pretty quickly, you know? This tub, though, has that statue, which is constantly adding more hot water. So, if you stay in for the same amount of time, you’ll get dizzy,

and it'll feel bad. Why don't we try getting out a little early today?" "Let's do that."

Freida and I get out of the tub early. It's quite early by my own intuition, but Freida, thoroughly warmed up, is bright pink all over.

"Did it not feel good?" asks Yutte. "Are you okay?"

"We're done for today," replies Freida.

After we exit the bathroom, Yutte tells us that she'll give us a massage with a perfumed oil, but I turn down the offer. I'd ordinarily be inclined to accept, but in my particular case, I won't be taking another bath anytime soon. After I return home, I don't know if I'll be able to clean it all off when Tory and I are scrubbing each other. I put on my clothes, dry my hair, and then watch Freida as she gets her massage.

"Massages... they're so refined," I say. "I don't particularly like how long all this takes, but my grandfather says that if I'm to enter noble society, I'd better get used to this kind of thing."

Ahhh, I finally get it. She got in the bath even though she thinks it's too hot and doesn't feel very good, and she's getting a massage even though she's making that slightly bothered face, all to practice for when she'll be joining noble society. I have absolutely no clue to what extent, but Freida's life must be very different to what it used to be.

"...Ah, I see. If you have the chance to get used to it, then you really should. There's definitely going to be big differences in common knowledge, manners, and so on, after all."

"My grandfather said the same thing. That's why he's acquired a lot of things for this house that one might find in a nobleman's residence."

Corinna's premarital lifestyle probably wasn't that different from what it is now. I had thought that this house felt very different than hers had, despite the fact that they're both the houses of merchants, but it seems that the extravagance of the guild leader's house is not just because he's a wealthy merchant. The food, the bath, the various supplies, they're all of vastly superior quality here, and it seems that they're all things that the

nobility have, gathered for Freida's sake.

"Wow, he dotes on you."

"...He's investing in the future. He's planning a lot of things ahead, making it so that I won't run into any problems when I open my shop in the noble's district, and so that we'll be able to make use of the foothold we'll finally get there."

Freida purses her lips, looking slightly dissatisfied. I certainly don't think that Freida's view is wrong, but all this is definitely not something done without any love at all.

"It's your dream to open a store, Freida, and isn't he helping you out with that? When your grandfather ordered your hairpins, what I saw in him was a man who saw nothing but his granddaughter."

"...Oh."

Does Freida, perhaps, really long for other people?

She couldn't go outside very often while she was sick with the devouring, and when she was finally freed from that she was immediately contractually bound to a nobleman. Since it's been decided that she'll be that nobleman's concubine, she'll be living for that reason, and making friends might be very difficult in such wildly different circumstances.

To live in noble society, she'll need to learn to be both stubborn and calculating, and she also needs to learn everything she'll need to know in order to manage her own shop by the time she grows up. I'm positive she spends every single day studying hard, all for her own sake, with the pressure of her very life, her future livelihood, and the expectations of her family weighing down on her. I think this must be an enormous burden for a little girl to have to bear. On top of that, although her family is spending a lot of money on her, it's obvious that they're operating out of their own self-interest, so she can't just quietly sit back and depend on their care.

Is that why she's so attached to me?

We both have the devouring, we're both already involved in business

despite not yet being baptized, and if Lutz is to be believed then we both let our weird hobbies run wild. We seem to be quite similar. Compared to the other kids, we have a lot in common, and there's no denying that we get along pretty well. Is that why she wants to trap me?

"Maine, this is amazing. My hair's so smooth!"

While I was spacing out, Freida finished her massage, got dressed, started running her fingers through her hair, and raised her voice in wonderment. Yutte, in the process of neatly combing it out, lifts up a lock of Freida's hair as well.

"Yes, it's turned out quite well."

"I'm happy you like it!" I say. "I hope it's enough of a thank-you for letting me use your magic tool?" "Oh my, you already paid me for that, so you don't need to worry about that, right?"

Smiling wryly at Freida's very merchant-like words, I shake my head.

"I really felt like I wanted to thank you. If the guild leader hadn't collected all of those magic tools for your sake, then even if I had a lot of money, I wouldn't have been able to do anything anyways."

"...I guess you're right."

We leisurely finish up in the bathroom and head back upstairs. When we arrive, a delicious smell is once again wafting out of the kitchen. It seems Ilse is tackling her second pound cake.

"I finally have a new recipe," she chuckles, with a trustworthy smile, "so I have to make sure I memorize it!"

I'm thrilled that a tasty recipe is spreading, so I can definitely support this.

"Ilse," says Freida, "since you're making a new one, it'll be okay for Maine and I to eat the one we made earlier, won't it? I'd like to enjoy some tea with her, please make some for us."

"I'll bring it out in just a bit."

As we move to the dining room for tea, Lutz arrives, just in time.

“Hey, Maine! I smell something amaaazing.”

I chuckle to myself over how sharp his nose is when it comes to smelling sweets. Lutz, though, turns to face me, narrowing his eyes and peering at me very closely.

“What’s up, Lutz? Is something wrong?”

“Uh, Maine. Did you kinda overdo it today? You got way too excited about your fever going down, didn’t you? Go get some sleep, like, now. You’re going to get another fever from exhaustion.” “Huh? Huh? You’re kidding. I feel great, you know?”

I pat my face, tilting my head doubtfully, but Lutz only scowls and shakes his head.

“You’re just too excited to notice it. You’re not looking so good.”

“Oh my,” says Freida, “but her fever from the devouring has gone away, and all we’ve done today was bake sweets and take a bath, you see?”

Freida, backing me up, lists off what we did today, her head tilted to one side. Lutz rubs frustratedly at his temples, sighing.

“...Alright. Freida, when you don’t have the devouring, you’re a pretty healthy person. When Maine doesn’t have the devouring, she’s still really frail. Whether she collapses because of the devouring or because of exhaustion, it’s fast enough that anyone who’s not familiar with the signs won’t see it coming.”

At those words, Freida and I spontaneously exchange a look.

“Maine, is that true?!”

“Freida, you’re not really weak?!”

It seems like we’d arbitrarily decided we understood each other. Freida thought that since my devouring was gone I was perfectly fine, and I thought that the devouring had left Freida just as weak as me so I should be fine if I just kept up with what she did.

“I don’t really know what a bath involves, but anyway, since it was your first time, and you wanted to show Freida a good time, you put in a lot of

effort, right?”

“Urgh... It wasn’t a lot of effort...”

It’s the undeniable truth that I’ve been feeling a little pressured this entire time, on top of being convinced that if Freida was doing okay then I must be doing okay too.

“You look like you’ve been moving around way too much today. Don’t take your own weakness too lightly. You really are weak, remember?”

“You don’t need to keep calling me weak like that!” “It’s true, isn’t it? Aren’t you supposed to come home tomorrow during the baptism ceremony? If you get sick again here, your family’s going to get really mad, you know?”

If, after getting help in curing the devouring, I run around a whole lot doing various things to try to show my thanks, then straight-up collapse with another fever as a result, I’d be throwing the favor right back in their face. My father, who’s looking forward to me getting well and coming home, would be very angry, my mother would scold me endlessly for being such an enormous bother to Freida, and Tory would just be flabbergasted. “Why can’t you just be good for once?” she’d say.

“Aaaarnggh...”

“He’s absolutely right,” says Freida. “You’re here under my supervision, so I can’t let you ruin your health on my behalf. Maine, please, go rest. Alright?”

When Freida says that to me, a worried look on her face, I give the two of them a big nod.

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Lutz, for telling me. ...Freida, sorry, but, would you mind splitting that ‘pound cake’ with Lutz?”

“Yes, of course. Yutte, please help Maine get back to her room.”

“Certainly, miss.”

I’m led back to the guest room, and when I lie down on the bed, I’m suddenly keenly aware of how exhausted I actually am. My entire body

goes limp. It seems that the slight hotness I've been feeling isn't actually from having been in a bath for the first time in ages.

That's Lutz for you. It just took him one look...

This was my first time in Maine's body working under the pressure of failure while making those sweets, and my first time in an actual hot tub instead of bathing as I normally do, so I had no idea how to adjust for that, I think.

Not only was I nervous about being in someone else's house, but just as Lutz said, I was in way too high spirits.

Wrapped up in the soft, comfortable bedding and the warmth of my own body, my consciousness immediately drifts away.

Chapter 52: Freida's Baptismal Ceremony

Translator's note: After soliciting feedback from some people more familiar with Germanic naming conventions than I am, I'm going back and making changes to how I'm spelling certain names. Older chapters will be updated when I get time to do so.

- Maine is now Maïne. Her name is supposed to be pronounced as "mine" (one syllable, like the English word), and I was basically deluding myself into believing that's how people were pronouncing it. Maybe an umlaut will fix it.
- Tory is now Tuuli. (A mistake I've regretted since chapter 5 but have been too lazy to fix.)
- Yutte is now Jutte. The J is pronounced as a Y. It's German.

*

"Good morning," she says. "How are you feeling?"

"It seems like my fever has gone down," I reply, "but I can't say that I'm fully recovered, so today I'd like to rest quietly until my family comes to pick me up."

She chuckles wryly.

"There was quite a stir at dinner yesterday! When the dessert came out and the young mistress told the table that she and you had made it, the entire family wanted to meet you. They were quite excited, saying that they absolutely want you to work in our shop."

Wait, wait, lady, this isn't a laughing matter, you know? Did I somehow manage to narrowly save myself from certain death by going to sleep when I did? Should I just hide away in here for the rest of the day?

As soon as she said "your future is secure if you work at our shop", I realized that even she was trying to get her hands on me, putting me on my guard.

I look over at the door. “Ummm,” I say, trying to change the subject, “it really is noisy out there, isn’t it...”

“Ahh,” she replies, her smile widening. “The young mistress has finished breakfast already and is in the middle of getting dressed. Miss Maine, when you get dressed yourself, I’ll guide you to the dining room.”

“Um, I’m really sorry to bother you like this, but might you be able to bring me my breakfast in this room? I’m still not fully recovered, so I don’t need very much, and I’m nervous about meeting people for the first time. I’ll lose my appetite, so...”

To be honest, since I skipped dinner, I’m actually pretty hungry. However, having met Freida and the guild leader, I can guess that the rest of the family is just as diabolical. Just thinking about being surrounded by those people while trying to eat my breakfast makes my stomach ache. I don’t think I’d be able to get anything down.

“Heh heh,” she chuckles, “Understood, miss. I’ll bring your breakfast here.”

After the servant girl brings out and helps me change into some of Freida’s old clothes, she leaves the room. As soon as I’m alone, I collapse to the ground, head clutched in my hands.

Oh crap. Something weird is happening. I knew that the guild leader and Freida had their eyes set on me, but why does the rest of the family want me now, too? Is it because of the pound cake? But, they have sugar here, so they have sweet things, right? There was that one sweet they brought out for me before, that pizza-like thing baked with nuts and drizzled with honey, right?

This really isn’t something I actually want to think about, but if sugar has only just started appearing on the market, then the art of making sweets might not be well-developed yet... that can’t be what’s happening, right?

As I lay there, head still in my hands, I hear the footsteps of the servant girl coming back with my breakfast. I quickly stand up and, with a careful nothing’s-going-on-here expression, go to greet her.

“Please enjoy your meal,” she says.

It looks like they figured out my tastes exactly after yesterday's breakfast. There's white bread with jam and honey, paired with juice from some sort of sweet fruit. There's not as much soup, but there's a proper full portion of bacon and eggs for me.

Under these keenly observing eyes, it feels like my weak points will be found out in an instant.

“Thank you for the food,” I say, and start eating.

I feel like, once breakfast is finished, I should stay hidden in this room, claiming to still not be feeling well, until my family comes to pick me up. The guild leader and Freida are menacing enough as it is; I can't face an entire family like that myself. I desperately wish that I could summon Benno and Lutz.

As I slowly eat my breakfast by myself, thinking about how I'm going to deal with what comes after this, Jutte bursts into the room.

“Good morning, Maïne. How are you feeling this morning?”

She's very hurried for someone coming in to ask me how I'm doing. I get the impression that I should keep my answer to just the bare facts, so I put down my bread and give her a foolishly honest answer.

“My fever's gone down, you know?”

“Might I ask you for your assistance with the young mistress's hair? I would like for you to show me how to put in her hairpins.” “...Sure, but can I finish my breakfast first, please?”

I can probably count showing her how to use them as warranty service for a product I've made. I'm probably not doing this because I'm being too eager to help, or because Jutte's staring at me strangely.

I finish my breakfast relatively quickly and then head for Freida's room, guided by Jutte. Her room is on the third floor. From what Jutte says, it seems the second floor is for the guild leader's generation, while the third floor is for his sons' and grandchildren's generations. Since the two floors

are tied together by an indoor staircase and everyone takes their meals together, it doesn't really feel like it's two separate houses, though.

"Mistress Freida, I've brought Maïne to see you."

"Please, come in!"

In Freida's room, near the door, is a standing partition. If it were to be turned around, it could be used to section off the room into something like a parlor, so in one corner there is a canopy bed, and opposite that is a set of shelves that reminds me of a writing desk. In the middle of the room is a small table with a few chairs set around it. The curtains on the windows and the canopy are all done in girlish reds and pinks, but there are no dolls or accessories anywhere in the otherwise simple room.

Today, hairpins and several combs are lined up atop the table. Freida sits at one of the chairs, her hair combed out. With her pink, fluffy hair let down and carefully combed out, she looks almost like a life-sized doll.

"Good morning, Maïne. You feeling better?"

"Morning, Freida. My fever's gone down, but I'm still not totally better yet, I think."

In other words, I can't do too much. When I give her my honest description of my condition, her expression clouds a bit, and her eyes drop.

"Oh. Sorry to call you up here. I thought that since you were the one to make your sister's hairpin, you might have been the one to style her hair, were you not?"

"That's right, so...?" "Do you think you could give me the same style, please?"

Tuuli's hairstyle involved bringing both sides of her hair together in the center and braiding them together in a half-up style. That kind of style wouldn't suit Freida, but since I went through all that trouble for making two hairpins, and since pigtails are cute, I think the best style for her would be twintails.

“Hmmm, well, since I made two hairpins, instead of doing exactly the same thing, let’s do it in two parts. I’m going to braid it, okay?”

“I’ll leave it to you!” “Please, teach me as well,” says Jutte, her eyes glittering.

I use a comb to separate Freida’s hair into halves, then start braiding one half of it together over her right ear, explaining what I’m doing to Jutte as I go.

“Gather it up from here, then match it to this, and then twist it like this to make the plait.”

“Gather it up from here, then I match it to this, and... like this?”

Jutte takes the left side and, carefully observing what I’m doing, starts to braid. As expected of someone used to working with her hands, she’s very skilled. Since my hands are small, though, and since I am by no means handy, no matter what I try to do the braids keep slipping out of my fingers and coming loose. Tuuli’s hair is naturally wavy, so even if a braid is a little bit sloppy and a bit too loose here and there, that in and of itself just adds to the overall grand impression, but the quality of Freida’s hair means that any such mistakes would just immediately stand out.

“Since you picked it up so quickly,” I tell Jutte, “I think it would be best for you to do both sides. My hands are small, so it’s hard for me to gather up all the hair.”

“It certainly does seem like it would be difficult to try this with hands as small as yours. Very well, I’ll braid the other side as well.”

Having already learned how after the first braid, Jutte sets to work, smoothly braiding the other side. Perhaps it’s because she’s working with hair she’s used to the feel of, but she leaves no holes or gaps as she works. Because Freida’s hair was so cleanly divided by the comb, it’s parted very neatly, unlike when I’d done Tuuli’s hair.

...Nngh, it really hurts to see my own unskillfulness on display like this.

“I’d be much happier if I’d had just a bit more time to practice, but...”

Jutte mutters fretfully to herself as she looks at Freida's done-up hair. My eyes go wide as I notice how intensely she's reacting, and Freida chuckles wryly, with a troubled expression.

"You know," she says to me, "Jutte said that she really wanted to talk with you yesterday evening so that she could spend all night practicing."

"Ahh, and then I got tired and went to bed early, so... I'm sorry!"

As I try to apologize for having caused her trouble by my feebleness, Jutte quickly shakes her head.

"Don't worry about it at all. It's your condition, you couldn't help it. I was just thinking... if I had known how to do this earlier, I could have done the young mistress up even more prettily."

Oh my, I see. Her hobby is dressing up Freida, is it? She is as cute as a life-sized doll. I understand perfectly! I, too, got fired up over making her hairpins.

Next, when Jutte finishes with the braids over Freida's ears, I carefully insert my masterpiece hairpins through the string binding them together and arrange them so they won't fall off.

Since there are four deep red miniature roses, no matter if you look at her from the front, the side, or the back, you can always see at least one flower. The way the spray of white baby's-breath is set against her light pink hair makes the tiny flowers look like white lace, making the red of the roses stand out even more. The green leaves that peek out here and there accentuate everything very nicely.

"Yep," I say, "even better than I thought! These match you perfectly, Freida."

"You look quite adorable, Miss Freida," says the servant girl who had helped me get dressed earlier, while Jutte brings over the garments that Freida will be wearing today.

Freida stands up, and the servant girl takes the chair away. Immediately, every person in the room transitions into clothes-changing mode, and I hurriedly get out of the way. Freida raises one arm, onto which a sleeve is

quickly placed; when she raises the other, it's also sleeved much the same way. Several people button down the buttons and tie up the strings, as Freida gets dressed without doing anything but standing there. I let out an amazed breath, watching the kind of princess-like dressing scene you'd only see in books or movies.

If it weren't for everyone's many years of experience, this wouldn't be going anywhere near as well. Not only do the servants need to know how to dress her, but Freida also needs to know how to be dressed, otherwise things wouldn't go smoothly at all. If I were in the middle of that, me trying to raise and lower my arms would just end up with me hitting someone I can't see, I think.

Freida, still in the middle of getting dressed, looks over at me, smiling brilliantly.

"Maïne, if you'd like, do you want to try watching the procession from this room? The windows in here were made specially to let me see outside better."

The windows of the guest room I had been in had wavy glass in them, but the glass in the windows here, in Freida's room, the glass is perfectly flat, making it easy to look at the scenery outside. It wouldn't be any exaggeration to say that watching the ceremonial procession through the windows here as it advances towards the temple would be like having a prime box seat.

"Can I?"

I glance back and forth between Freida and the windows. She smiles broadly at me.

"Yes, of course! If you're afraid to be here by yourself I can have Jutte stay with you."

I would indeed be uncomfortable staying in someone's room while they were away, so Freida's suggestion is most welcome.

"That would be really helpful, thanks."

"Certainly," says Jutte, "I would be happy to accompany you."

Jutte's face immediately lights up, probably from hearing that she can watch from this window. It can't be helped that she'd want to watch her mistress Freida go out in her finest clothes, and if Freida has her stay with me, she'll be able to see her in all her glory.

"Thanks, Freida," I say. "I'll watch from here."

It seems like all of the dressing-up work, down to the boots, was finished while we were talking. The two servants who were crouched in front of her feet smoothly stand up and take a step back.

"Miss Freida, we're all finished."

"And nothing's out of place, I wonder?" she replies.

Freida, completely done up, turns slowly on the spot. Her outfit is white, with fluffy, warm furs around her neck. It's embroidered here and there with bright red and pinks, matching both her hair and her hairpins.

"Well," she says, "this seems cute."

"Whoa, amazing, amazing!" I enthuse. "Freida, that looks really good on you!" "Miss Freida," says a servant, "I've brought your family to see you."

It seems that as we were praising her, the rest of her family had been told that she was done getting ready and had come here to see. The first person to step out from around the screen is the guild leader.

"Oh, Freida! You look magnificent. Wearing such beautiful flowers during the winter's baptismal ceremonies, you look like an angel... no, a goddess of the blooming spring! You are truly lovely. As expected of my granddaughter!"

"These hairpins you bought for me really suit me, don't they?" she says, smiling, lightly touching her hairpins. A broad grin splits the guild leader's face. "They really do. Your delighted smile is worth more than anything in the world."

The rest of the family starts to enter, one by one, as if they had been waiting for the guild leader to get enough praise in before interrupting.

"Whoa, Freida. That look really suits you."

“Out of all the girls I know... you’re the cutest!”

Two young boys, about the same age—probably about ten or ten and a half years old—start to praise Freida.

...Huh? A little while ago I was thinking that maybe Freida wasn’t used to being praised like this, but these two boys seem to be acting like giving her compliments is no big deal, hm?

I tilt my head questioningly to the side as Freida looks up at her older brothers with a troubled expression, like she couldn’t believe that she was being praised.

“...Why are the both of you here?”

“Why? It’s Earth Day, so we’re off from work. Didn’t we say we’d be here to celebrate with everyone?” “I’d heard, but until now I’ve never seen anything come from words like that, so I didn’t think you’d really be here this time.”

...Wow, so these brothers don’t keep their promises. With that kind of uncertainty, she might be convinced that their compliments were just empty words too.

The brothers, perhaps because they noticed Freida’s distrust, instantly grow pale and start coming up with various excuses. While they do that, a married couple wanders over, completely ignoring the situation and overlooking the two children.

“Amazing, those hairpins.”

“Yes, I want some for myself! How splendid they are.”

As I watch the chaotic family gathering unfold, suddenly, the guild leader leans down, thrusting his face in front of me.

“Ah, Maïne!”

Crap! I’d been planning to lock myself in my room so that I wouldn’t have to meet these people!

The guild leader, not at all caring that I stepped back with a squeak, clasps my hands tightly, moved to tears.

“You’ve done so well. I must thank you, Maïne. This is the first time I’ve ever seen Freida so happy with something I’ve bought for her to wear. Just like you said, her delighted face is worth so, so much more than her surprise.”

“I... I’m very glad you’re pleased, I put a lot of effort into it.”

Eeeeeek! Save meeee, Bennooo!!

“There aren’t many other people around here who understand these feelings. From now on, when I buy a gift for Freida, I’ll consult with you first! Incidentally, Maïne, there’s one thing I wanted to ask you about... guh?!”

With a jerk, the guild leader is pushed away. For a moment, I’m grateful for my rescue, but it really is only for the briefest moment. The guild leader is suddenly replaced by many faces, crowding in to see me all at once.

“You must be little Maïne, aren’t you? I’ve heard so much about you from Father and Freida.”

“Yes, umm—”

As I start to try to properly introduce myself to Freida’s father, I’m spun around to face someone else. I blink quickly to reorient myself, and see Freida’s mother in front of me.

“Thanks for making friends with Freida. She’s been having so much fun lately and is smiling a lot more. As her mother, I’m really quite grateful!”

“Th... the pleasure is all m—”

As I start to try to express my own gratitude, her two older brothers shove themselves in front of me.

I beg of you! Just give me a second to get a response out! ...Ack, too close! Your face is too close!

I’m panicked to the point where my voice doesn’t come out at all. I freeze up, my eyes darting back and forth uselessly. The brothers, without any reservation, poke at me and pat my head.

“Huhhh, so this is Maïne? I’d only heard stories, but she really does exist, huh. I guess she’s not made up after all.”

“She’s supposedly been here for a few days, but this is the first we’re seeing her, isn’t it? Maïne, your mouth’s just flapping, you know?”

“She really does exist,” he says, like I’m some kind of rare monster with a low spawn rate, or some mythical beast?!

“You two, isn’t it about time to go? Let’s head downstairs. Give Maïne a little space.”

The one who reached out to save me from being crushed was Freida. Today, she really is a goddess.

“Yes, yes,” I say, slowly trying to back away. “It would be really bad if you were late, so it would be best for you to get going, you know?”

One of the brothers firmly grabs my right arm, and the other catches my left hand.

“Let’s go together, Maïne. Come celebrate Freida’s baptism with us.”

“Ah, no, I was just going to stay here and...” “You’re a guest of the family, it shouldn’t be a problem if you come out with us.” “Right, right! Celebrations are more fun when there’s lots of people, after all.”

I, both arms firmly captured, shake my head frantically, but this overbearingly pushy family doesn’t hear a word of my complaints.

Is this genetic?! Does the guild leader’s family have a doesn’t-listen-to-people gene?!

Out of all of the people here smilingly watching on as my wishes are completely ignored, Freida is the only one who sighs and scolds her brothers.

“You two, if she gets sick again because you push her around too much, I’ll get scolded too, you know? Maïne has the same devouring fever I do, please don’t make her do too much. Her family’s coming to get her this afternoon, but if her fever comes back or she faints then that’ll be a problem.”

“But, we finally get to meet her. We just want to make friends, right?”
“She’s still not feeling well, so we’ve decided that she’s going to stay in this room and watch the ceremony from the windows here instead. She can’t go outside. I’m sure she wants to go outside, but...”

It seems that she’s evoking images of herself, not able to go outside because nobody knows when she might collapse from the devouring, enviously watching the world pass by her window. Her older brothers instantly look much more serious, and they let go of my arms.

“Now, everyone,” says Jutte. “The bell is about to ring. The young mistress must go outside to make her debut.”

At her word, the rest of the family gathers up around Freida, then quickly bustles off, leaving me with the impression that I just watched the passing of a hurricane. It looks like it really was the right decision to not have breakfast with them. If they kept firing questions off at me with that much force, jerking me around like that, I’d definitely pass out for days afterward.

“Miss Maïne,” asks Jutte, “are you feeling alright? They aren’t bad people, but they can sometimes come on a little strong.”

That wasn’t a little!

I keep my retort to myself, and instead move over to the window. Despite the fact that there’s a fire burning in the hearth, it’s still chilly near the window. Jutte brings me a shawl, which I wrap around myself, and I look down out of the window.

It’s very sunny outside, but the occasional glitter of a falling snowflake and the fog my breath leaves on the windowpane shows just how bitterly cold it is outside.

Across from the window, I can see that Freida has already left the house and is now being admired by the neighbors, standing out like a queen amongst peasants. Surrounded by her family, she wears the happiest smile she’s ever had.

From where I watch, amongst the few decorations that the children are

wearing, the hairpins I made stand out conspicuously. I understand now just how Freida could have noticed Tuuli's hairpins from her window here.

Tuuli must have stood out just like this, huh. She was so cute that everyone must have been talking about her, huh.

As I look down at Freida's baptismal ceremony, all I can think about it Tuuli's ceremony, how my father had a meeting he really didn't want to go to, how my mother looked as she smiled, wearing her only good dress, and so on, and so on. Somehow, I really want to see my family again.

"Miss Maïne," says Jutte, "you look a little pale, is something wrong?"

"When I see how happy Freida is down there with her family, I think about how I want to be with my family too. They're not coming until the afternoon, though..."

As soon as the noonday bell rings, my family arrives to pick me up, as if they were lying in wait outside. My father's affection, as overbearing as it ordinarily is, warms my heart.

"Maïne, were you lonely? Daddy was so lonely!"

"A little, yeah. I was a little bit lonely."

Freida's family invited us to have lunch with them, but my mother politely told them that she couldn't possibly ask them to do more than they already had, and I struck the decisive blow by nagging her about wanting to eat her home cooking after so long, so we wound up going home without any significant resistance.

"Aww, but I wanted to have a big feast too..." whines Tuuli, puffing out her cheeks. "Sorry, Tuuli. The food at Freida's house is wonderful, but I really want to eat Mommy's cooking even more."

"Eva," chimes in my father, "your cooking really is delicious."

We head home, with me riding on the shoulders of my high-spirited father. It's only been a few days, and the home I'm returning to is poor and worn out, but I can finally breathe a sigh of relief now that I'm no longer under constant mental strain.

Freida's house was full of extravagant meals, luxurious baths, and comfortable mattresses. Even though every single thing there was fascinating, the mental strain from being there wore me out completely. Everything was so clean and easy there, but for some reason, I never found myself wishing I could live like that forever.

Ahh, at some point, I started calling this place home, huh...

Chapter 53: The Beginning of Winter

“Master Benno’s been wondering if you’d been pressured into something, or if you’d been recruited out from under him. He’s been really worried about you.”

“Ahh, I kept praying for him to come save me, I wonder if he heard me?”

When I was trapped in Freida’s house, I’d silently called for him, over and over, to come and save me. Maybe he picked it up on some strange wavelength?

As I hum thoughtfully to myself, head tilted to the side in contemplation, Lutz scowls at me with a somewhat dissatisfied expression.

“...What about me?”

“Huh?” “Didn’t you pray for me to come save you too?”

When I look at Lutz’s wounded expression, I just want to leap forward and tickle him without saying anything. Thinking about that makes me smirk, entirely unintentionally, and Lutz starts pouting even harder.

“Why are you laughing?!”

“I mean, you really did come and save me, didn’t you?” “Huh?”

Lutz freezes, startled, like a deer in the headlights, and I can’t help but laugh out loud.

“Lutz, didn’t you tell Freida that I’d get a fever if I was too active? Thanks to that, I got to sleep soundly, so I didn’t have to sit through dinner, which meant I didn’t have to listen to another sales pitch and feel bad about it... you really saved me!”

“Heh heh, oh really?”

Lutz smiles proudly, gripping my hand a little tighter, then moves a half-step ahead of me. Maybe he thinks that if he can block a little bit of the wind that’s hitting me, there won’t be as much snow falling on my head.

“Good afternoon,” I say, upon reaching Benno’s shop. “Ah, Maïne,” replies Mark. “I am overjoyed to see that you’re well again.”

The inside of Benno's shop is both lively and warm. When Mark saw the two of us enter the shop, breathing little sighs of relief, he quickly came over to greet us. It seems to me that, even though the snow has started to fall, the number of people coming and going hasn't decreased a bit, even though I'm hearing that some workshops have already closed down for the winter.

I murmur this to myself, looking around the store, and Mark smiles down at me.

"That's because this shop still sells things during the winter," he says. "Oh, is that so?" I reply.

Since the days during which the snowstorms make it impossible to move around only increase as the winter goes on, I'd thought that people here lived in such a way that would make it impossible to spend money. It seems that I was wrong.

"When the noblemen are shut indoors by the snow, they have a lot of free time to spend. Their purse strings slacken a surprising amount for the sake of finding things to stave off their boredom."

"Ah, I see, entertainment, huh..."

I can't make a game console, but things like trumps, karuta, hanafuda, sugoroku, and other familiar card games start bouncing around in my head. If I have the spare time to do so, maybe it would be a good idea to try making something like that.

Lutz tugs firmly on my sleeve. "Did you just think of something?"

"Something that would really be better if we had paper."

It's possible that I could make card games work with very thin, wooden cards. However, that would require the skill to slice wood very thinly, as well as cut them to approximately the same thickness and size. It would be relatively simple to accomplish if I were to get someone skilled in woodworking to do it for me, but since we're operating under the premise of "I'll think of it and Lutz will make it", I at least don't want to make these until after our baptismal ceremony.

I wonder if Lutz actually can make thin sheets?

Besides, I have yet to actually see any evidence of paints in this world. Since I know dyes exist, it's not unreasonable to think that paints might too, but there's nothing in my house that could possibly be used to paint playing cards.

For something like Othello or shogi, though, we might be able to make it work with just ink and a board. When it comes to the most ways to play with something, though, playing cards are number one.

While I mumble to myself, deep in thought, I'm led into the office, where Benno abruptly leans in close to look at me.

"Maïne, you're all better now, right?"

"Whoa?! Y... yes," I say, blinking quickly. "I'm sorry for making you worry."

Even with my reassurances, Benno still looks at me with deep suspicion, and won't stop scrutinizing my face.

"Master Benno," says Lutz, "she's fine. She was just thinking about something, there's nothing wrong with her health."

"If you say so," he replies.

Perhaps Lutz's words finally convinced him, as he suddenly turns away, walking to a table over by the fireplace. He sits down, letting out an enormous, heavy sigh.

"Those magic tools were something that old bastard had gathered up, and he said he had to be extremely persistent in order to get that many of them, so I had to gamble on whether or not he'd actually let you use one of them, but..."

"Ah, he tried to force me to work at his shop. If I hadn't had enough money to pay him, he'd have wanted me to transfer over to his shop, you know, to pay off the debt?" "Debt... well, that's to be expected. But, it looks like you had the money?"

He grins a wide, triumphant grin. I nod at him, laying out the facts of the

trap that the guild master and Freida had laid out for me.

“Yes, sir. For the use of the magic tool, the guild master quoted the price to you as one small gold and two large silver coins, but the actual cost was two small gold and eight large silver coins, so—”

“That old bastard!” shouts Benno, roughly scratching his head in frustration. “I just barely had enough money to cover it, which was a relief. It looked like the two of them were not expecting me to have the necessary funds, and were quite shocked.”

As I continue explaining, Benno is momentarily taken aback, then murmurs to himself, “that’s right, I did increase her information fee...”

He smiles broadly. “Well, if it gave those two a shock then that’s alright with me. However, be careful around those two. If you keep hanging around them like you do with your complete lack of a sense of danger, they’ll gobble you right up.”

I, with my complete lack of a sense of danger, had made what I’m pretty sure was a pretty grievous mistake, but I think it should be best to tell Benno about it. However, as I start thinking about that, I find myself wanting to delay the scolding that’s inevitably coming, and can’t stop myself from picking the most roundabout way to broach the subject.

“Umm, Mister Benno. I have a question. What kind of sweets are common around here?”

“What do you mean?”

I flinch as he glances at me with his reddish-brown eyes, and start adding to my explanation.

“Well, sweet things are rare at my home, and are just things like honey and fruits, and then paru during the winter.”

“Ah, that’s right.” “...So, y-yes. Mister Benno. This is a little off-topic, but Freida had sugar at her house. Is that particularly unusual?”

Considering that there’s no sugar for use in cooking around my house, I think that it would likely be something that would have only spread

amongst the upper classes. Even still, I want to ask someone who knows things about its distribution, if possible, hopefully be told that it's something that's actually pretty common for the majority of the town and it's just that my family is too poor to buy it, or something like that.

Of course, there's no chance that the answer will actually match my fervent desire.

"Hm, it's rather unusual around here. It's only recently started to be imported from foreign countries, and it's gathered quite a lot of popularity in the royal capital and amongst the nobility, but... wait. You. Did you do something again?!"

Seeing as how I'm already guilty of so many things, Benno almost immediately notices my scheme. His eyebrows go straight up.

"Um, I made a kind of sweet called 'pound cake', and they seemed to really latch onto it..."

"Oh, that!" says Lutz. "That was super tasty. It was really moist, and it melted in my mouth, and it was the first time I had something sweet like... wait, Maine!"

Although sugar has started circulating amongst the nobility, it seems that there aren't enough kinds of sweets being made to consider this place as having anything of a pastry cuisine. A pound cake is a very simple, orthodox cake, but there's no mistake: I overdid it.

The two of them glare at me, and I am, as expected, filled with the sense that I've done something terrible.

"Why in the world would you, confronted by carnivorous animals, stick your head out of the bushes like that?! Isn't it obvious that you'd be devoured in an instant!"

If pound cake has gotten him so enraged, then I can take some small comfort in having not instead made sponge cake or shortcake. Sure, that's because I was nervous about the scales and that wood-fired stove, but, ultimately, that saved me.

"I mean," I say, "I'd promised Freida that I'd make sweets with her, and I

was trying to think of a way that I could show her my thanks—”

“If you wanted to thank her, your money is good enough!”

What Benno is saying lines up nearly with what Freida had said to me earlier. To merchants here, once you’ve completed your transaction, anything beyond that is unnecessary.

“Urgh, Freida said that to me too.”

“Again?! What do you do when the person you’re negotiating tells you these things? Didn’t I already tell you to make sure if your opponent is actually okay losing?”

Noooooo! I have no learning ability at all. Although, isn’t it only natural to want to give thanks to someone who just saved your life?

“I just wanted to thank her for saving my life...”

“So, in other words, the fact that her old bastard of a grandfather just deceived you fell right out of your empty head, did it?” “Ngh...”

I’m at a loss for words after that. I can’t deny that, in the end, since I had the money, they saved my life. However, if I hadn’t had enough, and I’d been forcefully pulled away from Benno’s shop to work at the guild master’s, I’m sure my feelings would have been more complicated.

“...Seriously, since you have the devouring, they can’t really bank on having you for any real length of time, so they’ve been going easy on you. If they were serious, you’d have been acquired long before you even noticed it. Don’t do anything to explicitly get yourself caught.”

Ah, I see, I think I understand a little more clearly now. I’d been thinking that these traps they were spreading out to try to recruit me were a little too easy. It seems that they’ve only just been poking at me, since I’m someone who’ll either get crushed by the devouring or have to enter into a contract with a nobleman.

“Umm, when you say they’d acquire me before I noticed it, what would that look like?”

“The simplest thing for them would be to approach your parents and lay

the groundwork there. There's no way that they'd refuse someone offering to become your patron. They'd attack you from there, after your baptism, sending over an associate to say they'll take care of you from now on, and without you even knowing about it you'll suddenly be engaged to their son. The only reason they haven't done that yet is because they don't know whether or not they'll still have you after a year." "That's, that's terrifying!"

I tremble, goosebumps covering my arms. Benno looks at me in amazement.

"You finally got it? Looks like there's a limit to your lack of fear. ...So, you just delivered them this dessert?"

I tilt my head to the side, not really understanding the meaning of his question, then explain how Freida and I made it together.

"No, I don't have the physical strength in order to be able to make sweets, so I explained the process to Freida's household chef and she helped us make it. They had a lot of white flour, and sugar, and even a wood oven in their house, it was amazing!"

"Yes, amazing, amazing! So, in other words, you gave them the entire recipe..."

Benno has his head in his hands, a sight that makes me rather anxious. I had no idea whatsoever that a cake I made just to show my thanks could make such enormous waves.

"Er, did I do something wrong?"

"You gave away something that could be sold to the nobility for free. You're an idiot, aren't you?"

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what gets sold to the nobility and what goes to the working class. I get that a cake recipe is something that's worth some money, though. I should be more careful in the future.

"Urgh... So if that's the case, then would it be okay if I taught a chef here how to make it so we can sell it here too? There's no way they could have started selling it by now..."

“Acquiring sugar is still difficult.”

Benno gives me a clearly disgusted look when I suggest that everything might be okay if we could get it to market first. Giving me that look doesn't help the problem, though. Acquiring sugar isn't my domain. That's Benno's job, the man who does business far and wide.

“Well, I guess I'd better give up for now, then. If you can find a cook with easy access to sugar and an oven, I'll give you the recipe to 'pound cake' for free!”

“...From the way you're talking, it sounds like there's more.”

Benno, having caught on immediately, looks at me, but all I've got are recipes that you can't make work without any sugar. Even if I were to tell him, there wouldn't be any meaning to it. I, having recently been taught how recipes for sweets could be quite valuable, puff up my chest and turn my head away towards the door.

“Any more will cost you,” I say. “Show them that stubbornness!”

“...I'll do my best,” I say, slumping dejectedly.

I am not at all used to having things I've done out of good will turned into raw calculation, but since this is what the world of merchants is like, I have no choice but to get used to it.

“Is that all you had to tell me?”

“Ah, no. This is much more personal information, but I'm unable to leave my house in the winter, and I won't be able to come to the shop until spring. Please don't worry about me.”

Benno and Mark, who've become overprotective after I collapsed right in front of them, are both here. Although I'm sure that even if I didn't come to the shop there wouldn't be any problems with managing the store, but it would be bad for me to make them worry about my health again, so I think I need to make this statement.

“Unable to leave your house, you say?”

“If I do, I'll be stuck in bed again.” “Hmm? Didn't you say you'd be

helping Otto, though?”

It seems that Benno somehow got the idea that I’d be going to the gates frequently during the winter, but that’s not quite right. There’s no way my family would let me do something that reckless.

“Ummm, only on clear days, when my health is good, and my father is working either the morning or the day shift. I don’t think that’ll be more than ten times over the course of the winter.”

“...Will you really be able to hold down a job after your baptism?” he asks. “That’s something I worry about every day,” I reply.

Benno, deeply concerned, may have asked me that question, but I’m really the one with questions for him. Is there work that I can actually do?

“Well, it’s good that you’re thinking about it so hard. So then, how are you planning to deliver your winter handiwork? As the spring baptismal ceremony starts coming around, it would be a big help to have some stock here at the shop.”

We’d previously discussed delivering our merchandise in full when spring came around, but it seems like that won’t be in time for the spring baptismal ceremony. It also appears that he doesn’t have much stock left from what we rushed to create for the winter ceremony.

Lutz cheerfully raises his hand. “I can bring them,” he says, “depending on the weather. Clear days are for picking paru, so I can come to the shop on cloudy days, I guess?”

“Ahh, paru, huh... I miss it. Paru juice is such a treat for children.”

Benno smiles wistfully. Perhaps even Benno used to go picking paru back in the day? I smirk, suddenly imagining Benno splitting his spoils of war with Corinna. Lutz, sitting next to me, thinks about gathering paru for a moment, then gets a sly grin.

“I’m definitely going to eat parucakes this year too,” he says. “...Parucakes?” says Benno, dubiously. “What might those be?”

I start thinking of what the world would be like if the recipe for

parucakes got out, then suddenly break into a cold sweat.

“Ahh, Lutz. How about we keep that recipe a secret, alright? Otherwise we won’t be able to get any paru anymore.”

The dried-up pomace left over after squeezing all the juice out of a paru isn’t something that humans can eat. It’s animal food. People, believing that, bring those rinds to Lutz’s family, trading lots of it in exchange for fresh eggs. However, if word of its usefulness were to spread, then paru pomace would likely be very valuable. In that case, I’d have caused a huge hassle for everyone expecting to be able to use it to feed their livestock.

“Okay. It’ll just be ours to enjoy, then!”

“Yeah, let’s leave it just between us.”

When it comes time to head home from Benno’s, snow has started to pile up, bit by bit, on the sides of the road. I look upon the signs that a full-blown can’t-leave-the-house winter has finally started, and breathe a small sigh.

“Looks like the days I can’t go outside have started, huh.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

Lutz nods slightly, looking down at the snow accumulating on the road. Karla, his mother, had told me that the mood around the house wasn’t great. Lutz, the reason behind it, must be feeling that pressure even more. Winter, when everyone’s locked inside their homes, must be an especially harsh season for him.

“Hey, Lutz. Come over to my house every few days, okay? Bring your studying stuff and any pins you’ve got finished.”

The only thing I can offer him is a little room to breathe. Since it looks like Lutz’s family treats him harshly every day, and he can’t leave his house without good reason, it seems like it would be good for him to use his discretion about how many pins he should bring at a time.

Lutz’s expression opens up a little at my suggestion. “Yeah, I’ll do that,” he says. “Thanks.”

As the days of snowstorms continue, fewer and fewer people walk the roads. To endure the bitter cold, people refrain from going outdoors, passing the time away inside their homes.

Since my father's a soldier at the gates, even though it's wintertime he can't take a vacation from work, just like last year. Even during snowstorms he still has to work, so it's rare for him to be home.

At home, Tuuli works diligently on making hairpins whenever she has time. Since she knows for sure that this will bring in money, she works even more seriously at this than she did with weaving baskets last year. My mother, still showing interest in our winter handiwork, has to put making clothes for the family her higher priority. Since my baptismal ceremony is this year, she said, making me a good dress is her first task.

"Altering Tuuli's dress from last year won't work, now, will it?"

Tuuli, over the last year, grew even more. By summer, her dress had already started getting a bit tight. As such, she'd barely worn it. Altering it to fit me, though, wouldn't actually save all that much labor, it seems?

"Your sizes are way too different, so altering this would be a huge task!"

My mother, troubled, smiles wryly as she says this. Ordinarily, nice dresses aren't something you have to make a lot of. If there's sisters in the family, it's especially common for there to be hand-me-downs. However, Tuuli and I are very different sizes. When Tuuli was just turning seven in time for her baptism, she already looked like she was about eight or nine. I, however, still look like I'm four or five. Wearing the same clothing as her is, frankly, impossible.

When I try it on, standing in the light of the stove, it drapes loosely off my shoulders and down my sides, the knee-length skirt hanging around my ankles.

"Hmm..." I say. "Although, if we take the hem and take it in like this we could hide the length, and then if we pleat it like this it would be cute, I think, wouldn't it? Then how about we decorate the areas around the stitches with little flowers?"

“Maïne, that’s not just alteration,” laughs Tuuli as I stand there holding my hem in a pleat. “That sounds really extravagant!”

It seems like they’re saying that since our sizes are so different, they’re going to alter the dress by undoing all the stitching, cutting it down to my size, and re sew it entirely. It seems my suggestion of hemming it up to hide the actual length of it is practically heresy.

I’m pretty sure this is the part where I’d rather not get scolded for doing something unnecessary.

“Oh, is it? If it’s too showy, then I guess we should skip that. I guess I was just thinking that if we just took it in like this, then when I start getting bigger we could just let it back out again...”

The only people who can use extra cloth like this are the kinds of people with lifestyles where they can afford it. Nobody who isn’t rich wears clothing with pleats in it, nor can they afford to add too many decorations, either. That’s why Tuuli’s dress had been made exactly to her size. Even if we’re only adding pleats to make it fit me, it’ll still wind up standing out a lot.

My mother, who has kept her mouth shut during this, seems to have come alive with a strange eagerness. She grabs me firmly by the shoulders, smiling broadly.

“...Let’s try doing it like you say, Maïne. If it doesn’t work, we can always do it the regular way. Right?”

Ah. Crap. I got my mother fired up. She’s... not going to stop, even if I tell her the regular way’s just fine, is she? I’m already going to be way busier than I was last year, between making my own hairpins, tutoring Lutz, and cooking, though.

Of course, there’s nowhere for me to run away from my overeager mother. At some point, while standing in front of the stove, wearing nothing but that nice summer dress, and holding it up while my mother pins it together, I, thanks to my frailty, catch a cold.

Chapter 54: Finishing My Dress and Hairpins

After two days, my fever broke.

The kitchen table has been pulled close to the stove, and sitting at it are my mother and Tuuli, diligently working on their handiwork. It seems that since they couldn't work on my dress while I was sick, they've instead been working hard on these instead.

"Oh, Maïne," says my mother. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," I reply. "So, how about we get back to working on your dress?"

She tidies up her handiwork, looking just a little regretful, and starts bringing out the dress.

"Where's Daddy? Morning watch?"

"He's on the day watch, but since it's snowing so hard he left already."

Soldiers are used to shovel the main roads. While they are given extra money as special compensation for their work, my father constantly grumbles (when he's drinking) about how the pay doesn't come close to covering the back-breaking manual labor.

"Now then, Maïne," she says, unfolding my dress and holding it out for me. "Put this on, please."

I look at it, with its short sleeves and thin fabric, and my face twitches. If I do as she says, then even if I'm standing right in front of the stove I'm going to catch another fever.

"Mommy, could I keep a long-sleeve shirt on? Just one's okay."

"Your dress isn't going to fit perfectly, you know?" "That's okay. I'll get bigger by summertime."

My mother puts a hand to her face as she tilts her head to the side, an extremely dubious expression on her face. She looks me over, as if considering her options, then lets out a sigh.

“...That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

At least say something like “I know you will,” Mother!

I, not wanting my fever to come back again, put on a long-sleeved shirt, then put my dress on over that, before surrendering myself to the alterations process.

“So,” I say, “the biggest size difference is in the shoulders. How about this?”

Just like my mother said, when I put on Tuuli’s dress the shoulders are so loose that it’s unsightly. So, I’ve tightly gathered up the extra width, draping it around my shoulders and making it into an off-the-shoulder dress.

“It’ll fall off your shoulders like that, you know?”

“Yeah, so we should add shoulder straps near my neck, made out of some kind of cloth or cord. If there’s leftover cloth from when this dress was made, then that would be great. If not, maybe some blue cloth? Something that would match the sash or the embroidery.” “We have some scraps left. It should be enough for shoulder straps, if that’s all we need.”

My mother rummages about in her cloth bin, then brings back some scraps. She rolls them up into cords, then sews them on as straps. With that, a dress that was so loose that it might fall off my shoulders has turned into an off-the-shoulder dress, designed with straps like a camisole.

“Ahh, it won’t fall off like this.”

My mother gives a satisfied nod. Then, she scowls, pointing at my side.

“Maïne, no matter how I look at it, that’s unsightly. What should we do?”

With the cloth drawn tight around my shoulders, all the loose material has gathered under my armpits. I pinch at it, my head tilted to the side.

“Well, since I’m going to be wearing a wide sash on my waist, it’s not a problem to have a little bit of extra material on the side, is it?”

“It is. It’s unsightly!” “Oh, is it? Then, how about we sew some proper pleats into it? It would take some time, but it would make it cute, right?”

I tuck the so-called unsightly cloth away into neat folds, demonstrating how to pull it back from my chest and towards my sides in three tacks. This kind of delicate sewing is very tedious, but it would get rid of the extra fabric and add decoration around my chest.

My mother hums thoughtfully to herself. "...You're right. That sounds good, then." She sticks out her hand. "I won't be able to sew that if you don't take it off first, though."

I take off my dress and hand it to my mother. I immediately put on as many layers as I can, before breathing a sigh of relief. That was really cold. I think I'll have another fever by the time we're finished.

"You're lucky, Maïne," says Tuuli, as she watches my mother sewing tacks into the dress. "That's going to be such a gorgeous dress." She sighs enviously.

Sure, the dress is going to have a lot of loose fluttery bits and is going to look kind of extravagant, but that's only due to the difference between our physiques. For the average younger sister, this kind of heavy alteration that takes up a ton of her mother's time isn't needed.

"...It's because our sizes are so different," I say. "But starting from scratch is even more work, so this kind of alteration is all we can do. This dress was originally made for you, you know? You get all the new clothes. All I get are your hand-me-downs, you know?"

"Ah, right..."

It is the fate of those poor children born later than their siblings to never wear new clothing. (Even Tuuli, though, gets a lot of her clothes from the neighbors, so she doesn't get to wear brand-new things very often, but still.)

"While Mommy's sewing, I guess I should work on my hairpin, too."

Since it'll be some time before my mother is done sewing in the tacks, I get to work on sewing my own hairpin. Since I'm finally starting work on it after all this time, I want to make something a little different than the ones we're making to sell.

“Mommy, since I’m making a hairpin for myself, can I use our thread?”

“Since we don’t have to make you a new dress, you can use enough for a hairpin, sure.” “Thanks!”

Last year, nobody really knew what I was talking about when I wanted to make hairpins, so getting thread was a difficult process, but this year they know what I actually want to do, so I was able to get my hands on some without a fight. Filled with a fresh appreciation of the importance of mutual understanding, I pick up some un-dyed thread.

“I think it went like... this...”

I pick up my needles and, digging through my memories, start knitting a round flower, like a lily-of-the-valley. Tuuli, having finished up a hairpin of her own, comes to check out what I’m working on.

“Maïne, what’s that? That’s kinda different from the flowers we did for Freida or for our handiwork, isn’t it?”

“This is going to be the hairpin that I’ll wear for my baptism,” I reply. “You’re finally getting to work on your own hairpin, don’t you want it to look like Freida’s? Those were so wonderful, too...”

Tuuli, who had been quite taken with the roses we made for Freida, rolls the lily-of-the-valley between her fingertips, lips tapered in a frown.

“I’m using a different quality of thread, so I don’t think it would turn out the same.”

I remember the intricate, glossy red roses we made for Freida, then sigh lightly. Even if I were to use the same pattern, they wouldn’t turn out the same in the end.

As I ponder this, Tuuli grips her needles firmly. “If it’s okay that they’re not the same, then I’ll make them! You made a hairpin for me, so I want to make a hairpin for you too.”

“Thanks, Tuuli. So, could you please make a flower like one of the big ones we made for Freida, except could you use this thread and make it a bit bigger?”

Tuuli is delighted when I ask her to make the rose part of the hairpin. Since that rose is the largest, most eye-catching part, leaving it to Tuuli, who is more skilled than I, would make a much prettier result.

“Tuuli, do you remember how to make it?”

“I don’t have a problem with remembering things. Leave it to me!”

...I’m sorry you have such a forgetful little sister.

Having left Tuuli to work on the rose, I start diligently working on the smaller flowers. No matter how hard I’m working, though, my rate of output isn’t very quick, so by the time I’ve finished my third flower my mother has finished sewing in the tacks.

“Maïne, come try this on.”

“Kaaay!”

I strip back down to one layer, then pull the dress on. It’s turned into an off-the-shoulder, pleated, one-piece dress. Because of the pleats, it seems to naturally flutter as it hangs.

“Mommy, could you get the sash? I want to try it on.”

“Good idea,” she replies.

I tighten the wide sash around my waist, causing the skirt to gently flare out, almost like a balloon.

“I wasn’t too sure about this while I was still sewing, but now that I can see it on you, it’s really cute.”

“Because I’m cute, right?” “Because I’m good.”

Our eyes meet, and we burst into snickers.

She grabs me by the shoulders and spins me around. “Next is the hem. It’s still cute as it is, but it’s much too long.”

The dress, knee-length on Tuuli, comes down to my ankles. I have no idea who decided this, but around here girls under ten years of age wear knee-length skirts. Incidentally, there don’t seem to be any miniskirts here, although if I had to say, since one-and two-year-olds have such short legs,

knee-length on them is kind of like a miniskirt.

Also, and this is really bothersome, not only is it a problem if the skirt is too short, it's bad for it to be too long, too. Shin-length dresses are worn between ages ten and fifteen. When a woman grows up, it seems like it's most desirable for a woman to wear dresses so long you can't even see her ankles. The only women who can get away with wearing floor-length skirts like that, though, are ones who don't have to work. The dresses worn by working women, such as my mother, come down to the ankles.

"How might we go about pinning this up like we did the shoulders, I wonder?" ponders my mother. "Maybe take it up twice in the back and twice in the front, I think... but, Mommy, what do you think?"

"Hmm, that actually sounds perfect."

If we bring it up to knee-length in four places, we can make it look like a balloon curtain.

After we sew everything into place, we use miniature flowers like the ones on my new hairpin to conceal the extra stitching. Then, after arranging the folds of the skirt so that the embroidery on the hem is visible, my new dress is complete.

"That looks like a rich girl's dress."

"...Yeah."

The dress has been pleated, given loose, fluttery sleeves, and puffed out like a balloon. This dress, which uses plenty of cloth for purely decorative purpose, is clearly not a poor girl's dress, no matter how you look at it. All we wanted to do was take the unfashionably loose bits and hide them away with some clever sewing, but instead we wound up with a design that would be rare even in upper-class households. This is a dress that is quite clearly beyond our family's station.

"...Maybe we should have just remade it?"

"If I had the time to do that, then I really would like to, but... this is, hm, really conspicuous, you know?"

Tuuli, having overheard us, shrugs lightly, pointing at the half-finished hairpin she was working on.

“It’s too late for that, right? Just the hairpin alone is really conspicuous already, so it’s not like it can get worse.”

Amongst all the other girls, who merely had things woven into their hair, Tuuli and her hairpin had stood out from the crowd enough to catch Freida’s eyes. Since I’ve already decided that I’m going to be wearing a brand new hairpin, I’m going to be extremely conspicuous anyway, so wearing a showy dress isn’t going to get me any more attention than I already will.

Freida had even said that drawing attention to myself would turn me into a walking advertisement for my hairpins. So, I stiffen my resolve even more.

“We worked so hard already, and it’s cute, and I don’t care if I stand out. I’m going like this!”

My very health was the sacrifice necessary to create this dress. Plus, unlike the miniskirt-length maid dress I was forced to wear at my high-school cultural festival¹, this is a very reserved sort of design, so since it’s only knee-length there’s no need for me to be embarrassed by it at all.

“Well, Maïne, if you say so, then that’s fine with me. Now, what are you doing for your hairpin?”

“Since Tuuli’s working on this big flower for me, I’m making at least ten more little flowers like these.”

“I’ll help you, too. It’s your celebratory gift, after all.”

Chuckling to herself, my mother takes out her crocheting needles from her sewing box.

“Thanks, Mommy. So, if it’s a gift, then can we use the blue and the light blue thread too? Enough for three flowers each.”

“Well, now, if you insist.” “Yay!”

We all get to our tiny, detailed task of making the hairpin. The three of

us make short work of it. We end up with three large, white roses, three small blue flowers, three small light-blue flowers, and fifteen small white flowers. In the span of a single day, we've finished all of the parts.

"How are you going to decorate this?" asks my mother. "Aren't there too many small flowers?" asks Tuuli. "You'll see in a bit!" I say, with a grin. "I'm going to make this part myself. Don't look!"

Even though I said that, though, there isn't a single place in this house that I can actually work without being seen. The two of them pretend not to look, but I'm fully aware that they keep surreptitiously glancing over at me, full of curious questions but, since they are of course not looking at me, keeping their mouths shut. It's actually kind of funny.

"I'm home!" says my father as he walks through the door. "Ahh, I'm exhausted again. All I got to do today was shovel snow and babysit drunk people."

It seems like he'd tried to brush the snow off of himself before coming in, but he still tracked a bit of it on. While Tuuli and I quickly work to sweep it up, I glance up at my father.

"Daddy, did you finish the hairpin for my baptismal ceremony?"

"Sure, wait just a bit!"

My father smiles proudly as he brings out from the storeroom out a long pin that has been carefully carved straight and polished. When I realize just how much effort it must have taken to smooth this down so perfectly, my jaw drops.

"What do you think?"

"It's beautiful. It moves so smoothly through my hair, and doesn't get caught in anything at all. Daddy, thank you!"

I take the small scrap of cloth that I've attached the three large white flowers to and sew it through the hole at the end of the pin. Then, I run my needle through that cloth, and start threading the small flowers onto it in clusters with small gaps between each flower, so that they can hang down, swaying freely, like a spray of wisteria.

From the roses, the closest of the small flowers are the three blue ones, then the three light blue ones, and then five of the white ones. To add gradation, I add the remaining seven flowers in two more strands, giving it three in total. I'd made this based on the image of a pin that I'd worn with my yukata back in my Urano days, but this has turned out even better than I'd expected. This is definitely a pin to wear on an excellent day.

"Whoa, that's so cute, the way it sways like that!" enthuses Tuuli. "Try it on, Maïne!"

"After all that work, you should wear it with your dress, too," says my father. "Your daddy's the only one who hasn't seen it yet!" "That's right," adds my mother. "I'd like to see you in it too, and not over a long-sleeved shirt like before. Let's see you wear it properly."

Pressured by my family, I change into my new dress. Then, I slide my new hairpin into my hair, next to the chopstick I'm still wearing.

"Whoa, Maïne," says my father. "This is amazing! Everyone's going to think you're some kind of princess. The way you look right now is way more elaborate and way cuter than you looked when you were wearing Freida's outfit. You'd never be able to tell just by looking at you that this was Tuuli's dress, just modified to fit you. Now that's my Eva!"

My father praises me while also extolling the virtues of his wife's superior sewing skills, looking very moved. My mother smiles wryly at him, though, and finds a way to object.

"It's not fair for you to compare it to Freida's dress. The quality is so different! But, compared to just normal alterations, this has turned into something quite extravagantly cute, hasn't it! Working with so much extra cloth is really a whole different world of sewing."

"If the quality were the same, though, then I'd really be able to say that your work is the best!" "Oh my, Gunther!"

The two of them are lost entirely in their own world, now. Watching the two of them banter back and forth, flirting, is actually kind of painful to watch. I never actually had much of this kind of social interaction in my Urano days, so watching it unfold before my eyes is something I definitely

want to not have to do.

I want to escape, but how?

As I start drifting away into feelings that I've been completely left behind, Tuuli, who had been standing behind me and looking closely at my hairpin, steps back into my field of view, snapping me out of it.

"Yep, cute! It's really cute, Maïne! Your dress is showy and cute, but this hairpin is really good! The slow swaying of the flowers draws the eye, and since your hair is such a dark, night-sky blue, the white flowers really stand out!"

"Oh, really?"

Perfect, Tuuli. You're my angel.

Latching onto her life-saving voice, I turn around so that I don't have to see my parents. Once their flirty expressions have disappeared from my field of view, I let out a little sigh of relief.

"When we were working I was thinking to myself, 'wow, isn't this going to be too big?', but now that you're wearing it, it's no problem at all."

"Your hair is really puffy and wavy, but mine is really straight and doesn't have any volume, so if I didn't make a big, showy hairpin, it wouldn't look great if you compared it to my dress." "Oh, yeah, I see..."

We've only been talking for a few minutes, but already my thin summer dress is doing nothing to stop me from shivering in the winter's fierce cold. Goosebumps stand up along my entire body, and an unpleasant chill starts racing down my spine.

"A... achoo!"

Startled by my sneeze, my mother pushes my father aside and comes over to me.

"Maïne, we've seen enough of your dress already, go get changed and get to bed at once. You'll get feverish again!"

"Ah... achoo! Mommy, I think you were a little late. My spine feels all cold and shivery, and my neck is starting to feel a little warm..."

I am very quickly changed into my pajamas and hustled towards bed, but I'm already certain that my fever's begun to rise again. I crawl into my prickly straw bed, then let out a long sigh.

Well, I guess I was already sure that I'd get another fever, so it's not like this is something dramatically unexpected. I wonder, though, is my body ever going to get any stronger?

*

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Japanese schools put on yearly cultural festivals called bunkasai, in which students show off their creative and artistic achievements. These displays can include concerts, art galleries, or even maid cafes such as what is being alluded to here.

Chapter 55: Lutz's Tutor

As we work on our hairpin handicrafts, someone knocks on our front door. Tuuli and I exchange glances, then she gets up to see what's going on.

Tuuli unlocks the door, and it creaks open, letting in a gust of fresh, freezing air. Lutz walks in, snow still clinging to him.

"Whoaaa, it looks cold out there," I say. "Is it snowing hard?" asks Tuuli. "The road to the well was completely covered, but it isn't that bad out right now," says Lutz.

As we talk, all the snow falls off of him, landing where he stands, just inside the entranceway.

"Here, some pins. Each of my brothers made three of them, so there's nine here."

He sets the pin parts of our hairpins out on the table. As he lines them up in a row, Tuuli stands up and goes to fetch the decorations that we've finished so far.

"Ah, so, how about we finish putting together the hairpins we can?" says my mother. "If we do that, though, we're missing a few pins, you know?"

It looks like while I was out sick, she and my mother managed to finish quite a few decorations. I glance at the decorations she lines up on the table, and pose a question to Lutz.

"We've finished twelve decorations. You've brought nine pins with you. How many pins are we short by?"

"Oh? Umm... three." "That's right! Good job. You've been studying hard!" Glancing down, I notice that he has a bag in one hand, carrying his slate and his calculator. "Mommy, Tuuli, can I leave you to work on the hairpins? I'm going to go help Lutz study." Tuuli blinks incredulously, tilting her head to one side. "I heard that you go do calculations at the gates, but do you really know how to teach it?" "Um, yeah, I think I can teach basic reading and math."

I pout, sullenly, at how little faith my sister seems to have in me. Lutz, though, beams broadly.

“Maïne’s really amazing at reading and math! Well, she’s also really amazingly weak, too.”

You could have stopped after the first sentence, Lutz.

Even though I shoot him a nasty glare, my mother and Tuuli got a good laugh out of it, so it doesn’t make a difference.

Lutz starts pulling out his slate and some slate pencils from his bag, so I run to the bedroom to go get my own things. From the wooden box by my bed, I pull out my soot pencils and the little memo book that I managed to assemble from the usable parts of our slightly-failed paper prototypes.

I’ve been thinking that I could work on my book-making project under the pretense of helping Lutz study. Ordinarily, when my mother and Tuuli are working diligently on their handicrafts, it feels really awkward to sit next to them and play around with this by myself. If I’m doing it while teaching Lutz, though, then the both of us are writing on things, so I don’t think it would look too out of place.

Now then, let’s get back to working on this book!

Since I’ve worked on this whenever I’ve been able to find bits of free time, I’ve gotten just a little bit of work done on writing down my mother’s bedtime stories, but it’s still not fleshed-out enough for me to really be able to call this little memo pad a proper book.

With my memo book, soot pencils, slate, and slate pencils held in my arms, I cheerfully start heading back to the kitchen. Before I get there, though, I hear my mother speak.

“Lutz, don’t Karla and the rest of your family not like the idea of you becoming a merchant? Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

The sudden, serious question makes me stop dead in my tracks, my breath caught in my throat. Taking care to silence my footsteps, I slowly continue back into the kitchen.

Tuuli, seated next to my mother, is rigid and unmoving. Across from her sits Lutz, looking back at her with a stiff expression. As I sit down next to Lutz, my mother looks between the two of us, sighing, then opens her mouth to speak.

“I was wondering, you know, if Maïne was the reason you’ve been saying that you want to be a merchant. You’re such a kind boy, so I thought that perhaps Maïne said that she wanted to be one, and you’re following along to look after her.”

“No way!” he immediately objects. “I said I wanted to be a merchant, and Maïne got me an introduction. She’s the one getting dragged along, not me.”

Lutz was thinking that he wanted to become a trader, then he listened to what Otto had to say, learned about what citizenship meant, and decided he wanted to be a merchant instead. I honestly didn’t have much to do with that decision-making process at all.

My mother nods slightly, quietly staring at him. “I see. You’re the one who wants to be a merchant. But, if Maïne goes to the same apprenticeship as you do, then you’ll continue to look after her like you’re doing now, won’t you? If you’re spending time on her, then you’re not going to do a very good job at your actual job as an apprentice. You’re going to do sloppy work if you’re preoccupied with her all the time.”

I think my mother’s warning hit Lutz right in the heart. Sitting next to him, I can tell that this unexpected revelation has caused his breath to catch in his throat. Her warning struck close to home for me, too. She’s not at all wrong.

While I worriedly grind my teeth, Lutz lifts his head determinedly to look at my mother.

“...I want to become a merchant, no matter what. Since I have Maïne here with me, I think that’s actually possible. So, while I do want to be as much help to her as I can, it’s not like I’m trying to become a merchant for her sake.”

That’s right, Lutz has his own dreams, and being a merchant would put

him in a much better place to let him do what he wants to do than being a craftsman would. Talking with Benno and Mark has only made him more sure of this. He may be doing everything with me, but there's no way he's becoming a merchant solely for my sake. This is the fastest way for him to get where he wants to go.

"Then, if Maïne can't be there with you—say, if she's too weak and has to quit her job—would you still continue trying to be a merchant?"

Lutz clenches his fists together tightly on top of the table, looking steadily into my mother's eyes. "Yes," he says, nodding slowly. "Of course I would. My mom and dad are telling me to stop and just be a craftsman, but I'm not going to give up now that I've made so much progress. Even if Maïne tells me to stop now, I'm still going to do it."

"I see," she replies. "...Well, that's good then! All I've heard is what Karla's been telling me, so I've been a bit concerned. Thanks for talking with me about this, Lutz."

To Karla, it probably looks like I'm making Lutz follow along behind me. That isn't entirely false, given how visible my condition is, but it seems like she barely even half-listens to what Lutz says and is punishing him for the warped view of his goals that she thinks he has.

And then, even though she told him to stop, he refused...

I actually kind of want to know just what it was that Karla said to my mother, but I have a feeling she wouldn't tell me if I asked. I'm pretty sure she'd just say that if I wanted to know so badly, I should go ask her myself.

"Mrs. Eva," asks Lutz, "I have something I'd like to ask you too."

"What is it?" she replies, tilting her head to one side. I can tell from the way she is looking quietly back at Lutz that she intends to answer seriously. Lutz breaths a little sigh of relief before opening his mouth. "Why aren't you fighting against Maïne becoming a merchant? My mom and dad keep saying that merchants are people that everybody hates, so why let Maïne be one?"

Well, merchants are people who always take their commission fees and

pinch their profit margins, so I guess it's understandable for a craftsman to think badly of the profession, but... isn't saying that literally everybody hates merchants a little too harsh?

As if she heard my thoughts, my mother smiles wryly at me, then frowns slightly, looking troubled.

"I think everyone has different ideas about what merchants are like, so I can't say anything about an entire profession like that. But, to answer your question... I think the reason I'm not objecting is that Maïne's always been very weak, you know?"

"Huh? It's because she's weak?" he replies, tilting his head uncomprehendingly to the side. My mother smiles a little. "To be honest, I wasn't sure if there was a job Maïne could do. I couldn't imagine that anyone would be able to find a use for her. So, if she's found herself a useful job where she can do the things that she's good at, and she's working as hard as she can to do it, how could I possibly object to that?"

My throat tightens a little when I hear those words. The motherly love she feels for me makes my eyes grow hot.

"Oh, okay. ...I'm trying my hardest too, but they still won't accept me, though..."

Hearing the bitter words he spits out, I reach out to put my hand on top of his.

"It would be good if they would, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah." "So, let's make that happen. Which starts with studying!" "Yeah, you're right!"

Lutz smiles, and the mood immediately lightens. As the serious-talk atmosphere dissipates, Tuuli, who had been stock still the entire time, lets out a huge sigh of relief as she relaxes. She gets her sewing kit out and starts working on attaching decorations to pins. As I watch all this through the corner of my eye, I tap my finger on Lutz's slate.

"Now, let's start by reviewing your basic letters. Try writing them out, let's see if you remember them all."

“Got it.”

After giving Lutz his challenge, I resume my book-making project, writing down the stories my mother told me in my memo book. The soot pencils I’m using are much darker than a regular pencil would be, but they don’t cost me any money to use, unlike ink.

As I work, I occasionally glance over at Lutz’s slate to see how he’s doing. When I do, I see him writing out each letter without hesitation.

Lutz’s studying is almost going too well. When we start our apprenticeships together at Benno’s shop, his time to simply study is going to be dramatically reduced. Since he knows that this is going to be the most disadvantageous situation he could be in, he’s devouring information like he was starving.

Since his family’s displeasure at the idea that he might become a merchant is straining the atmosphere at his home so much, Lutz has been considering, in the worst case, leaving home entirely. For that reason, it’s really obvious that he’s in a hurry to cram every bit of information into his head as he can.

“Nice, you’ve got all the basic letters memorized, and you’ve written them out so neatly! That’s amazing, Lutz!”

“I’m just following your lead,” he replies.

Writing clean, legible letters is no easy feat without having practiced countless, countless times. Lutz isn’t like me, with my experience from my past life. Now that I think about that, I really do have to admire his raw perseverance.

“Since you’ve got your letters down, next let’s work on memorizing some words. Let’s practice by writing out ordering forms, which I think is going to be the most useful.”

On my own slate, I try writing out a form for ordering lumber. Since this is something I wrote up countless times while making paper, I can get it down with ease. When I finish that, I also write down the names of Benno’s workshop and craftsman associates that I learned in the process.

“This is the name of the lumber merchant. This is where you put the name of the person making the order. When we were doing this, Mister Benno was doing the purchasing and then delivering it to us, so we’d put his name here. These are the kinds of lumber...”

Lutz watches me closely, trying his hardest to keep his transcriptions in pace with my writing.

“When spring comes around, do you want to try filling out the order forms for our paper-making supplies, Lutz?”

“Uh?!” “Let’s practice a lot so that you can.” “...Yeah!”

Having a concrete goal like that seems to have fired up his determination even more, as he starts earnestly practicing writing these forms, making sure not to misspell any words. I watch him work for a little while, then open my memo book back up and resume writing down my mother’s fairy tales. It’ll still take quite some time for me to finish copying down all of these bedtime stories.

“How about we practice math next?”

Having finally finished one story, I lean back and stretch my arms wide, calling out to Lutz. He looks up from his slate, where he’s practiced his vocabulary countless times by now, then nods at me, setting aside his slate and pulling his calculator from his bag.

“So, how about this for today?”

I start writing out math problems on my slate. Today, it’s addition and subtraction in three digits. After I get eight questions down, I look over and watch him as he uses his calculator. Unlike before, he’s barely hesitating at all as he flicks beads around on the device.

“Wow, you’re getting fast at that,” I say. “I memorized how to do the ones-digit calculations like you said, and that’s made this way easier to do.”

“Yeah. You’re getting faster at that than I am...”

The calculations that I’m teaching Lutz are simple enough that I can just

do them in my head, so I haven't really gotten any faster at using a calculator at all. As always, it's much faster for me to just do the math on paper than it is for me to use a calculator.

It's because I keep lending him my calculator so he can practice.

That's the excuse I try telling myself. I don't have a lot of time to work with it, so of course I'm not going to get any faster. If I were to actually have a calculator on hand all the time, though, it would... still be up for debate whether or not I'd actually practice as seriously with it as Lutz does.

"Your addition and subtraction is looking pretty good for now. When the number of digits starts growing, you'll use the calculator the same way."

"Things start getting messy when there numbers get big, though," he says, scratching at his cheek.

He's been using a calculator for just about a month, though, so this is fantastic progress.

"I don't know how to do multiplication or division on this either," I say, "so I guess we're stuck there."

Since I don't know how to do it on the calculator, for now, the only way I can teach multiplication and division is through the times table. The numbers here doesn't flow off the tongue like they do in Japanese, so I'll need to adapt how we'll be reading the times table out loud. It won't be as easy to say, but as long as he can give a quick answer when given a pair of numbers, that won't be a problem.

He's also gotten good at reading large numbers and can accurately convert between currency denominations. With his absorption powers, if he tries hard during his initial training, I think he'll be able to do just fine.

...Now, what the heck do I do?

What my mother said earlier is stuck very firmly in my mind. "If you're spending time on her, then you're not going to do a very good job at your actual job as an apprentice. You're going to do sloppy work if you're preoccupied with her all the time."

I am going to be nothing but a hindrance to Lutz when he's trying to do his job. I have no strength, have no stamina, and am fundamentally useless. I guess I've got some use when it comes to product development, but since I don't have any of this world's common knowledge, without Lutz beside me to help me understand the situation, I'd wind up in a lot of trouble.

Now that I think about it, I made Benno worry, too.

I recall how he had asked me if I, with my condition, could actually work. I hum to myself thoughtfully as I ponder the answer. Here in the dead of winter, I have nothing but time to worry about this, so I absolutely have to think about this properly.

Can I actually work without being a hindrance to Lutz... or to the other employees at the shop? I wonder, what should I do?

The next day, I still didn't have a good answer, so I continue thinking about it as I idly work with my crocheting needles.

As I work, my father calls out to me. "Maïne, if you're feeling up to it, do you want to go to the gates? The snowstorm's let up for today."

"Sure, I'll go!"

I stand up with a clatter, immediately rushing to get ready to head out. I put my slate and slate pencils in my bag, then put on as many layers of clothing as I can so that I can brave the cold outdoors.

Otto is at the gates. He'll have a merchant's perspective and he's a relatively uninvolved third party, so I'm certain he'll be able to give me his unvarnished opinion if I ask him.

Chapter 56: Otto's Consultation Room

"Maïne, up here," says my father. He leans down, stretching both arms wide, and I quietly let myself be picked up, clinging to his head. If I were to try to walk through this, we wouldn't make it to the gate in time for my father's shift. Now that I'm being held up, though, my head is above the snow. A cool wind blows across the broad, white expanse, sending eddies glimmering across its surface like ocean waves.

"Daddy, are you going to be shoveling snow on the main street today?"

"The noblemen have to be able to drive their carts," he agrees. "...In this snow, I'd think I'd rather stay inside."

With this much snow on the ground, I thought there wouldn't be that many people out and about, but there are quite a few more people hurrying about their business than I expected.

"There's a lot of snow out here, but there's still so many people outside," I say. "It's one of those rare days when the snow isn't falling, isn't it? When it is, there's about as few people out as you'd expect."

As he says this, though, a sprinkling of snow starts fluttering down from the sky, prompting my father to pick up the pace.

"It's starting to snow. Let's hurry, Maïne. Hold on tight!"

"Aaah!! I'm gonna faaall!!"

We arrive at the gate, clamoring the whole way. After taking a moment to roughly brush off the snow clinging to us, we quickly head towards the night duty room. After a light knock on the door, we push it open. A desk has been set up near the fireplace, atop which a veritable mountain of paperwork has been stacked, behind which is Otto, working on calculations.

"Otto, your long-awaited assistant has arrived!" says my father. "Make room by the fire."

"Squad leader, thank you very much! I've been waiting for you, Maïne."

The documents atop the desk rustle as Otto tidies them up, making space for me to work at. Judging by the absolutely enormous smile he's giving me as he welcomes me, it looks like the work has piled quite high, too. I pull my slate and slate pencils from my tote bag, then haul myself up onto the slightly too-tall chair.

"Now then, Maïne. Please go over the calculations for this duty post, and make sure they match up."

"Okay!"

Well, it looks like I won't be able to have my discussion until this mountain of paperwork is first straightened out. I look at the pile of documents that had been set heavily on the table in front of me, and pick up my pencil.

For a while, we work in silence. The only sounds that filled the room were the quick snap of beads from Otto's calculator and the scratching of my pencil against my slate.

A knock at the door cuts through the silence, and a young soldier steps into the room.

"Excuse me. I have a question for Otto..."

"Maïne, you handle this one."

Otto doesn't even look up as he volunteers me, his eyes glued to his documents and his calculator.

"Huh? Me? Oh, um, wait one moment, please, let me just finish this line..."

I finish working out the calculation, mark the answer off as verified, then look up. The young soldier looks at Otto, who is flicking the beads on his calculator around with frankly terrifying intensity, then at me, then sighs, holding out a roll of parchment.

"Please help me with this."

"What is it? ...Ahhh, a noble's introductory letter. Is the Private First-Class on duty?" "No, he has the night shift today..." "Then, get the chief's

stamp and make immediate arrangements for them to head towards the castle walls. Since it's been a long journey through all this snow, even the gentlest noble might be on edge, so be as quick as you can." "Yes, ma'am!" "If you do have to keep them waiting, I think you should make sure there's a fire in the waiting room, get them in there immediately, and make them some warm tea." "Understood."

The young soldier salutes, then rushes out of the room. I return his salute, then turn back around, resuming my calculations.

"You've gotten good at that," remarks Otto, taking a brief break from his calculations to rest his hands. My pencil keeps moving as I reply. "They're all dealt with the same way, after all."

The work done at the gates is pure bureaucratic red tape. Fundamentally, the response to every situation is the same. Once you've read through the manual once, you can deal with everything that isn't completely out of the ordinary.

After calculating for another long while, I've gotten a little tired. I tidy up the pile of calculations I've verified, then lean back, stretching my arms wide. Otto, as well, seems to have found a stopping point, and starts gathering up his documents.

"Man, I'm tired," he says. "Shall we take a break?"

"Please," I reply.

Otto brings in some hot tea from the mess. As we slowly sip at it, I start asking him for advice.

"...and then, there's what my mother said to Lutz when we were talking. She said that if he was always looking after me, then he wouldn't be doing enough work to really be pulling his weight as an apprentice. If he was keeping his attention on me, he'd leave the job half-finished."

Otto gives me a look as if my mother's words were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Isn't that obvious? If he's only doing half of his work while looking after someone else... of course it would wind up half-finished. If Lutz is

really aiming to become a merchant, he can't afford to spend his time looking after you, I think."

"...That's what I thought."

Right now, we're not yet apprentices, so we don't do any actual work at the store. We just go there to deliver our goods. As such, Lutz is able to keep an eye on my physical condition while we work together. When we become apprentices and have to do real work, he's very likely not going to be able to stop worrying about me, and I can't let myself put him under that sort of burden.

As I sit there, wondering what I should do next, Otto looks down at me with gentle eyes.

"Hey, Maïne. Are you serious about becoming a merchant?"

"That's my plan for now, yes. I've been thinking of a few things I might be able to commoditize..."

My decision is based on the fact that you can't buy or sell things without the approval of the Merchant's Guild.

"Leaving commerce aside, I think it would be better if you didn't work at Benno's."

It's already been decided that my apprenticeship would be under Benno. I've lately been feeling anxious about my actual work, but I'd like to know why Otto is telling me that I shouldn't work for Benno.

"Why do you say that?"

"That store's growing quickly. Every single person there is working earnestly. It'll be exhausting work, and I don't think your body can take it."

The reason he gives me as he lightly shrugs his shoulders is the same reason I've been feeling anxious, and the same thing that I heard from Benno the other day.

"...Mister Benno actually asked me the same thing, whether or not I could really do the work."

"There's work to be done that just involves doing calculations and

validating documents, but even a merchant's job has deadlines, so it's hard to entrust that kind of work to a girl who could collapse at any moment."
"That's true, isn't it."

I know full well that Benno has been thinking about how the information in my head could be turned into new goods or otherwise profited from, which is why he doesn't want me to go to any other shop. However, when you think about my ability to actually work in a shop, my lack of strength and stamina is a fatal flaw.

Hiring an employee whose health makes her actual attendance rate constantly uncertain would be a hard decision to make, even in Japan. If I were in charge, I wouldn't want that kind of employee.

"My other opinion is the kind of harsh thing you don't really say around children, do you still want to know what it is?"

I tilt my head slightly to the side in thought, and Otto studies my reaction closely. The ultimate reason I came here was so that I could get an honest, objective opinion from someone like Otto, who doesn't feel like they have to handle me with care. Under the table, I clench my fists, steeling myself for whatever answer I'm about to get, then slowly nod.

"Please."

"The number one reason I think you shouldn't go to work for Benno is, frankly, human relations. You're going to wreck the social dynamic of the shop. If a brand new apprentice is, thanks to her poor health, constantly taking time off from work and, when she's actually there, only doing physically undemanding work, wouldn't all of the other employees feel more and more upset as time went on?" "...Right."

Even if it's made clear that the problem is my health, there will almost certainly be problems with the people who see that kind of favoritism, even if they aren't immediately apparent. I'd been working so frantically to make sure Lutz secured his apprenticeship that I hadn't actually considered what things would look like after I'd actually started my own.

"And then... I think there'd be a problem with your wages, you know?"

“Hunh? My wages?” I hadn’t even considered thinking about my wages being a problem, so my voice comes out a little weird. I tilt my head doubtfully to the side. Otto sighs. “You’re already bringing in a huge amount of profit to the store, Maïne. There’s no way the other apprentices will be making as much as you are, right?” “My base pay would be the same. I thought I’d just be getting my share of the profits added as a special case...”

Although Lutz and I have waived our profits for making paper in order to secure our employment, I’ve been planning on holding tight to the profits on any goods we come up with after that. I have no intention of handing over all of my secrets for free.

“Even if it’s a special case, you’re still going to be a brand new apprentice earning more money than the ten year veterans at the store. I really think that’ll be a huge problem.”

“Ohh...”

Human relations certainly are very quick to strain when money’s involved. What Otto is pointing out is completely correct. On top of that, if human relations collapses, then there’s a high probability that the shop itself might go down too. A shop, ultimately, is made of people.

“It really does look like I shouldn’t work at the shop, no matter how you think about it.”

Every one of Otto’s points is correct, and I have no rebuttal for any of them. I’m starting to feel like all I would do at Benno’s shop is sow the seeds of discord amongst his employees.

“And then, there’s one more thing I’m worried about.”

“What is it?” I urge him on. He’s laid out so much stuff already, I can take whatever he’s got left. He leans in a little closer, lowering his voice. “Maïne, your illness... it’s the devouring, isn’t it?” “Mister Otto, you knew about it?!”

My eyes open wide, but Otto starts lightly shaking his head in denial.

“Ah, no, I didn’t. I learned about it after Benno brought it up as a

possibility. The other day, Corinna came to me and asked, ‘do you know anything about this disease called the devouring?’”

“Miss Corinna did?” “A little while ago, Benno was unusually out of sorts, it seemed, and he said something about it to her. Something about how the devouring’s symptoms had suddenly manifested, and someone nearly died in his shop? Around then, the squad leader started acting extremely out-of-sorts, too. Between his behavior and what Corinna said, I pieced together that you must have been the one to collapse from the devouring.” “...I’m sorry to have worried everyone so much.”

It looks like the story had spread far and wide. I’d collapsed in Benno’s shop and gotten carried to the guild master’s house. In hindsight, that must have been extremely conspicuous.

“The squad leader said you’d been cured, but... from what I’ve heard from Benno, it’s incurable, isn’t it?”

“...That’s right.”

The magical implement might have staved off the devouring for the time being, but even now I can feel it building back up again. Freida, as well, had told me that it’s going to build back up to overflowing again in less than a year.

“Have you told him?”

“No, not yet,” I reply. “My family’s so happy now that they think I’ve been cured, so telling them that I haven’t been is...”

Talking about the devouring would involve discussing a lot of extremely painful subjects, like how much magical implements cost or how much longer my life will actually be, so when the subject comes up I’ve been dodging around it as obliquely as I can. I don’t know much about it myself, other than “there’s a strange fever that keeps building up inside me on its own and if it overflows then I die”, so it’s really just difficult to talk about in general.

Otto shakes his head slowly, a stern expression on his face.

“You should tell them. Your father thinks you’ve been cured, so he

probably thinks that you'll be just fine going to work. Once you've made sure to take care of the things you need to take care of today, then we can start talking about your job prospects for tomorrow. If you're just going with whatever works in the moment, you're going to cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people."

"I understand."

Since I've recently realized myself that I have a tendency to charge ahead without regard for how much trouble I'm causing others, I have no choice but to meekly agree with Otto's rebuke.

"So, for the future, since you'll need magical implements to live, if you want to meet with the nobility then you should go to the guild master's shop, I think. Benno's shop is big, but it's still very new. No matter how hard he tries, history and tradition carry a lot of weight. That's not the kind of thing you can get past so easily."

"That may be true, but..."

As I waffle, Otto raises his eyebrows.

"Is there some sort of problem with you not working at Benno's?"

"It's not that I wouldn't be working at Benno's, it's that I don't like the guild master. He's pushy, and the way he runs his business is..."

Being overbearing might be a necessary quality for a merchant, but I can't stand that he tried to deceive me by quoting a too-low price for a life-saving magical implement. I'm certainly thankful, but I have no intention of making his acquaintance.

"Benno's the same, isn't he?"

"Hmmm, Mister Benno's pushy, and he's greedy when it comes to money, and he's the kind of person who tests other people the moment he meets them, but I can tell he's picked up on a lot of my flaws and is helping me try to grow past them." "Ohhh?" he says, an unsettling smile spreading across his face.

His expression gives me pause. I'm absolutely certain my last sentence is

going to go straight to Benno's ears.

"Also, I haven't decided yet if I want to live the rest of my life stuck uselessly under a nobleman's thumb."

Now that I've finally started to think that I actually want to keep living with my family, I'm finding it difficult to imagine wanting to live as a nobleman's pet, especially when I don't know what kind of treatment I would wind up facing. Like Freida, said, my choices are to either rot away surrounded by my family or to live out my life in a noble's captivity. If I had to make that choice right now, I think I'd choose my family.

"Well," says Otto, "if you haven't decided what you want to do with your life then there's not a lot to talk about. If you're not going to work for a shop for the sake of building connections with the nobility, then I think even more that you should think about your other options besides working at a shop. Honestly, from where I'm standing, if you and Lutz do the "Maïne thinks it up and Lutz makes it" thing and make sure to keep control of the profits and the rights, there's no need for you to actually work for a shop, I think."

I give him a big nod. I certainly haven't been thinking about anything but working alongside Lutz, but if thinking is the only thing I can really do, then there's no real need for me to work for a shop in order to do that.

As I nod to myself, mulling his words over, Otto breaks into a beaming smile. It's such a brilliant smile that it's actually a little suspicious.

"Let me see... perhaps you could have a job that lets you work from home and keep a close eye on your health, like transcribing letters or copying paperwork, while also just focusing on developing new products? You could force your products onto Benno, and then when your health is good you can come help me with my work here. Your life wouldn't be much different than it is right now, which I think would be great for your health in the long run!"

"...I'll think about it."

Maintaining the status quo might indeed be best for my body, but I'm incredibly wary of the intent behind that suspicious-looking smile.

“Well, this is something you’ll have to talk about with your family first.”

“I’ll do that.” “Now then, break time’s over. Let’s get back to it, shall we?”

Otto clears away our cups, and I put my slate back out in front of me. My pencil clacks against its surface as I go back to working out the numbers, making sure there’s no mistakes in Otto’s calculations.

Talking with my family, huh... I’m scared that if my father knew that I only had a year left to live that he’d go insane with grief.

“Maïne, let’s go home.”

By the time my father, finished with his shift, comes to the night duty room to pick me up, I’ve done far too many calculations. By this point, I’m dizzy. When I close my eyes, all I can see are numbers floating through my brain.

“You’ve been a big help, Maïne,” says Otto as we leave.

Otto, who’s been flicking beads around on his calculator this whole time, is still very energetic. I’m starting to think that clerical work involving nothing but calculations might be utterly impossible for me.

“Daddy, aren’t you cold?”

Snow lightly falls from the sky as we walk home. My father has wrapped me in his coat as he holds me in his arms, but while I’m nice and warm, I can’t help but think that he must be freezing.

He just smiles and shakes his head, though. “I’m not cold if I’ve got you, Maïne. I’m actually really warm!”

“Ah,” I say.

He truly loves his family and is ridiculously devoted to his daughters. How will he react when I tell him about the devouring? I worry that his smile will freeze off of his face. It’s a scary thought, but... I can’t avoid this topic any more.

“What’s wrong, Maïne? You’re looking a little gloomy.”

“...Daddy, I’ve got something to tell you. About my sickness.”

With just those words, my father stops walking, his face rigid. His mouth tightens, and he looks down at me very seriously. He casts his eyes away for a moment, then starts walking again, more quickly this time, hurrying as if he's trying to run away from something.

“Let's talk about it when we get home. Your mother will want to hear about it too.”

“Yeah.”

Chapter 57: Family Council

“Welcome back, you two!”

“...What’s wrong, Dad? You’re looking kind of grim, you know? Is it too cold outside? Is Maïne too heavy?”

“That’s mean, Tuuli!” I pout at her. My father gives me a thin smile. “You’re too light, Maïne. You need to grow bigger.”

He sets me down and gently ruffles my hair. Now that his mood’s lightened a bit, Tuuli smiles slightly in relief. “Sorry, sorry,” she says, coming over and brushing off the leftover snow that was clinging to my head. In my heart, I applaud her for changing the mood so quickly.

“It started snowing a bit on the way home, and it got really cold!” I say, with a sour expression. Copying me, she gives me a sour look back. “You got Dad to carry you, and you got him to wrap you up in his coat, so you weren’t cold at all, were you? I can’t do that!”

Giggling, I head to the bedroom to put my tote bag and coat away.

By the stove, my mother is working on putting dinner together. “Welcome home. ...Shall we eat dinner first, then?”

It seems that, despite what we were talking about, my mother had taken in my father’s strained mood and tense facial expression and guessed that something’s up. She frowns for just a moment, then smilingly gets to work setting the table.

“Now, eat up!”

“Looks good.”

At my mother’s urging, we start eating dinner. We’re much less talkative than we usually are. I haven’t even said anything yet, but my father’s brow is furrowed, my mother is looking away, and Tuuli looks on anxiously. The atmosphere is already heavy. As I look around at the three of them, I lift a spoonful of hot soup to my mouth.

Will it really be okay if I tell them? If I say something like “I’ve got one

year left,” won’t my dad just go absolutely insane? How should I bring this up? I want to hide how expensive that magic tool was, too...

I keep eating, but all I can think about is the conversation that’s going to come after this, and my heart starts pounding loudly in my ears.

“Thanks for the food.”

After my mother hangs up the tableware, she picks out some herbs that have a calming effect and boils them into an herbal tea. The cups clunk onto the table as she sets them in front of us.

“Did something happen?” she asks my father, sitting down next to him. “It looks like you have something to say, don’t you, dear?”

He shakes his head slowly. His pale brown eyes snap to me. It’s scary to see him look so serious, without a single trace of the lovestruck smile he always looks at me with. I gulp, noisily, my breath caught in my throat.

“Maïne’s the one who has something she wants to talk about.”

When he says that, everyone’s eyes turn to me. Even though all I’m trying to do is talk to my family, my throat has gone dry from the tension.

“Umm, well, this is about my sickness, so...”

What do I say now? How should I best explain this so that it’s easy to understand? Those are the only thoughts tumbling around in my head, yet the words I need to give a basic explanation won’t come forth. I break out in a strange sweat, and my head goes blank as I try to hurry my thoughts along.

As I open and close my mouth soundlessly, failing to find my words, my father narrows his eyes at me.

“You’ve been cured, haven’t you? You went to the guild master’s house for a few days, and when you were cured, you came back home. Isn’t that what happened?”

“Umm, the short of it is that I’m not cured.”

My explanation vanishes entirely from my blank head, and I just say the conclusion. It’s like I set off an enormous bomb in the middle of them.

After a moment of stunned silence, they all simultaneously gasp loudly, their eyes going wide. Then, my father suddenly stands up, so forcefully it knocks his chair over, and slams his hand onto the table.

“...What do you mean?!” he says. “Was the guild master lying to us when he told us you were?!”

“You’re not all better?!” asks Tuuli.

They crowd in close to me, my father from in front of me and Tuuli from the seat next to me. I frantically wave my hands, trying to get the two of them to calm down and sit back down.

“Whoa, calm down, sit. I don’t know much about this myself, and I don’t really know how to explain this, so I just said the first thing that came to my mind, so that’s...”

Grinding his teeth so hard that I can hear it, my father sits back down with a clunk. My mother seems to have somehow kept her cool. She picks up her cup with shaking hands, swallows a mouthful of tea, then urges me on.

“Yes, please explain it to us properly.”

Next to me, I see Tuuli reach out for her cup as well. I pick mine up too, take a gulp, and start talking.

“My sickness is, um, called the devouring. It’s a really rare disease.”

“I haven’t heard of it...” says my father, nodding. Tuuli, though, grips her cup tightly. In a quiet voice, she says, “Maïne told me about this before. She said it takes a lot of money to treat it.” “Money?!”

This time, it’s my mother who stands up with a clatter, her eyes wide. She looks deathly pale. There’s no doubt that she had noticed that the guild leader had never asked us for any money. I’d hoped that, if at all possible, I could hide just how much money it was, but I think I’d better not try to do that now.

“Mommy, I’m trying to explain, please listen,” I say. “.....”

She slowly sits back down, looking at me like she still has something to

say. Feeling everyone's eyes still on me, I begin to explain, starting with the devouring itself.

"So, the devouring, it's like a fever that's always in my body, and sometimes it just starts moving around on its own, and it's always just slowly building up. If I get really mad, or if I get sad enough that I feel like I want to die, or anything like that, then it starts running wild through my body. It feels like I'm being eaten alive when that happens."

"Eaten alive..."

Tuuli is white as a sheet as she stares at me. She glances down at my fingers and then up to the fringe of my hair, as if checking to make sure I'm really not being eaten away at right now.

"The fever is something that I can keep from moving around with my willpower. If I focus on the image of locking it up deep inside me, that works for a while, but it keeps slowly, steadily multiplying."

"M... multiplying?!"

Tuuli, visibly trembling, squeezes my hand tightly.

"When I can't lock it up, then it just explodes out, like it's going to overflow out of me. If it overflows, then I'll get swallowed up, but... last time, when that happened, the fever flowed out, and I was drowning. The guild leader used a magic tool and sucked the fever away. He sucked up a lot of it, but now it's starting to build up again, so I definitely haven't been cured for good."

Tuuli, whimpering quietly, stares at me with moist, quavering eyes, looking like she's almost about to start crying. Or, maybe, instead of "staring", should I say that she's making a face like she's trying desperately not to start crying? I feel like I'm going to start crying too if I keep looking at her, so I turn my eyes away and instead drink another gulp of tea.

"Then, um, Freida told me that I'm not really going to get much bigger, since there's a weird fever always nibbling away at me. You need magic tools to cure the devouring, and only the nobles have those, so they're

really expensive. Also, if your family doesn't have connections to people in the nobility, you can't get them either, she said."

"So, then, it... really was the guildmaster that saved you, wasn't it?" my father says weakly, his voice cracking. There's no sign of his explosive emotion from earlier. I nod. "Yeah, the guildmaster sold me one of the magic tools that he bought for Freida. But, she also said that if I didn't have any magic tools, then I should decide really soon what I'm going to do about it." "Do about it? Does that mean there's another way you can be cured?!"

My father leans forward, hope blazing in his eyes. Even Tuuli, who looked like she was moments away from crying, has a glimmer in her eyes. Seeing their sudden hope hurts me deeply, and I tell them what I could do if merely living was my only goal.

"She said my only alternatives were to either make a contract with a nobleman and be their pet forever, or to rot away with my family..."

"Be their pet forever?" asks my father. "What does that mean?"

From his facial expression, it seems he's having trouble grasping the concept. Tuuli's face is blank as she tilts her head to the side, perhaps because she didn't understand the words I was using. My mother's face is pale as she grips her cup.

"Freida has a contract with a nobleman, so she has the magic tools she needs to be healthy. She said that since her family is a wealthy and powerful merchant family, the contract is really favorable for her. Since I don't have any connections to any noblemen, any contract I get would keep me alive, but she couldn't say how well I would be treated."

"...You can't even call that living, can you," he murmurs, weakly.

I nod at him. From what I learned as Urano, I can't imagine that I'd be anything but someone that does exactly what she is told, living without any freedom at all.

"So, Maïne. How much did it cost?" asks my mother, unable to bear it any longer. "I can't imagine that the magic tool that the guildmaster gave

to you was free, you know?”

I nod, but in my heart, I know that I’m sunk.

“I had enough, don’t worry.”

“But how much was it?” “It was a lot, but it was to save my life, so, well...” “I’m asking you, how much was it? You can tell me, right? Don’t keep secrets.”

I try to dance around the topic, but my mother’s eyes flash dangerously as she gets angrier. I moan quietly to myself, turning my eyes away, then mumble out the answer.

“...two small gold and eight large silver.”

At the mention of a total that’s roughly what my father would make in two and a half years, everyone’s eyes go wide and their mouths drop open in shock.

“Two small gold and eight large silver?! How did you get that kind of—”

“I sold Mister Benno the rights to my ‘simple shampoo’,” I say, frantically. “The manufacturing rights, the distribution rights, the rights to set the price... I sold all of that to him, so that when the devouring—” “Whaaaat?!” shouts Tuuli, who has constantly been helping to press out oil to make it. “That stuff was worth that much?!”

Since the manufacturing process is just gathering nuts and herbs from the forest and pressing them down for oil, it’s very labor-intensive but costs nothing to make. It seems like Tuuli can’t comprehend that something like that could be sold for such an enormous amount of money.

“Yeah, it seems that if you sell it to the nobility, you can make a lot of money. He’s got a workshop for it and everything, and—”

Just as I’m about to start telling Tuuli about the workshop for making rinsham, my father interrupts, shaking his head as he stares at me angrily.

“That’s enough about that. Here’s what I want to know about: you’re sure it will relapse?”

“Yeah.” “...When? Based on how you’ve been talking, you know, don’t

you? You changed the subject so quickly, it's something you don't want to be asked, isn't it?" I didn't expect him to be that sharp. "Wow, you caught on quick..." I sigh.

My father, just after hearing that the devouring wasn't cured, had kicked over his chair and slammed his fists into the table. Of course I don't want to tell someone that enraged just how much longer I have left. Even though I'd been planning to avoid it, now that he's said that I don't think there's anyway I can weasel out of it.

"I'm your father, of course I caught on. ...Come on, stay focused."

He looks at me with glinting, pale brown eyes. I get the sense that if I try to deceive him, it won't just be the truth that I'll be running away from, so I open my mouth to answer.

"...About a year."

"Wh—?!" "She said that she thinks the next time the devouring fever overflows will be in about a year, so I need to think about things now."

A heavy, oppressive silence blankets the room. My father, who I'd thought would be enraged, hangs his head, eyebrows tightly knotted together.

Tuuli is the one to break the silence when she starts sobbing.

"Guh... Maïne, you're going to die? In a year? ...Don't say that!!"

She cries loudly, like she's letting out all the tears she's been holding out, and leaps from her chair next to me, grabbing me in a tight hug. I wrap my arms around her and pat her on the back, trying to calm her down.

"Tuuli, calm down. I'm not dead yet, you know. Freida and the guildmaster sold me a magic tool, so now I've got another year."

The words that I had hoped would calm Tuuli down instead act like oil poured on a fire. She shakes her head furiously, crying herself ragged.

"Ngh... don't talk about how you were dying! It's only a year! I hate this! Hic... and you were finally getting better too! Like we could start going to the forest together again! You can't just die!!"

When I died as Urano, it was in a big earthquake, so I didn't have to see any of my family's grief. Did I make them cry so sorrowfully for me, I wonder? And now, I've made my new family cry, too. I'm such an awful daughter.

"Don't cry, Tuuli. Hey, c'mon now. Even if I don't have any magic tools, there's got to be something I can do about the devouring, and I'm going to find out what that is."

"And what if you can't find it?! Then you're gonna die, aren't you?! No! I hate that! Waaaaaah!"

Being held so tight by someone crying all over me makes my own chest tighten up. My eyes grow hot, and even though I was trying to hold them back, my tears begin to flow, too.

"Tuuli... don't cry. I'm the one who wants to cry..."

"Hic... sorry, Maïne. I'll help you look. There might be something that can cure you somewhere, and we'll look for it, so... Nnn, but, even though I'm trying not to cry I just can't stop."

My own tears still spilling, I pat Tuuli on the back as she tries her hardest to stop crying. My father speaks up, in a quiet voice.

"What do you plan to do, Maïne? There's the way Freida suggested too, isn't there?" I sniff. "...Since I don't know how a nobleman would treat me, I can't even imagine wanting to be separated from my family. Hic... Freida said that the nobleman she made a contract with is allowing her to stay with her family until she grows up. So, what would have happened if he didn't?"

The answer is obvious.

"She'd have been taken away immediately, wouldn't she? There probably aren't that many noblemen who'd wait, I think..."

"...Mm, you're right."

I have not even the slightest clue as to what in the world a nobleman would find useful about the devouring fever. However, I think that one

who would grant some extra time after signing the contract would be someone benevolent indeed. If I consider that I'd be taken away as soon as the contract is complete, I know that I won't have much time with my family at all if I go down that path.

"So, you know, I'm thinking that it might be okay if I live with my family until I die. Uu... I don't want to leave you all..."

"Maïne..."

Tears glisten in my mother's eyes as well. She turns away slightly, as if she doesn't want her children to see it, and wipes them away. My father keeps a neutral expression, his eyes fixed on me.

"I've still got a year," I say. "So, I'm going to try my hardest to do the things that I want to do, and live so that I have no regrets. ...Can I stay here? Or... is it better for me to go away with a noble?"

"Maïne, stay here with me!" says Tuuli. "Don't you dare go away!"

Both of my parents nod, as if Tuuli had spoken for all of them.

I wipe away my tears, happy to be told that I can stay here, and give them a strained smile.

"So, here's what I actually wanted to ask you..."

"There's more?" asks my mother, startled.

All of this exposition to make them aware of the state of my illness wasn't actually asking them anything, though. Now that they know what's going on, I'd like some advice from them.

"It's about... my work."

"You're going to be a merchant, right?" asks my father, frowning doubtfully.

Taking solace in the fact that my father is listening to me calmly instead of raging, I continue.

"That was the plan, but maybe I was being naïve, or maybe not thinking through it all the way, but... it's not the kind of job that I can do, given my

strength, you know? Mister Otto said something like that too, like I'd just be a bother at the shop."

"Ugh, Otto..." growls my father, irritatedly.

All I wanted to do was get Otto's objective, outside viewpoint. It would be disastrous if my father were to explode on him later. Frantically, I start outlying the plan he had suggested.

"So, what he proposed was that I take a job I can do at home, like copying letters or official documents, then I can keep going just like I am now, selling things to Mister Benno and then helping at the gate when I'm feeling healthy enough."

"Oh, Otto said that, huh...? Hmm, he's right. It's best for you to stay home. You shouldn't overdo things."

He sounds a little happy, his mouth quirking up into a smile as he confidently declares this. Both Tuuli, who is still clinging to me and sobbing, and my mother nod vigorously in agreement.

"Um, I'd made a promise with Mister Benno to work at his shop already, though... is it okay to break it?"

This is what I wanted to ask my parents the most, since I still don't really know much about anything work-related in this town. Would there be issues if I were to break this arrangement?

"It's not like you've officially started work yet," says my father. "Since it'll be hard on him too if you suddenly collapse on the job, I'm sure it'll be alright if you make sure you explain things thoroughly to him."

"Okay! So, even though I hate to waste a job offer that I'd worked so hard to get, I'll try hunting for a job that fits my condition."

Perhaps I should consult with Benno to see if there really is a job that I can do at home. I'll need to make sure to ask him in detail when springtime comes around.

Because the conversation had dragged on for so long, the instant there's a gap in the conversation an enormous yawn forces its way out of my

throat. Seeing this, my mother claps her hands together.

“If that’s all you have to talk about, go to bed already. It’s late!”

“Yeah. Good night.” “Snf... hic... goog night...”

Tuuli, still blubbering, accompanies me to the bedroom and crawls into bed with me.

“Tuuli, don’t cry. You’re way cuter when you smile! Tomorrow let’s do lots of things together.”

“Okay, yeah, let’s play together a lot! Because you’re here.”

As I console her, I slip beneath the covers of my bed. She immediately follows, grabbing onto me tightly as if she’s not going to let me go anywhere. I decide to leave her be, if it’ll calm her down, and close my eyes.

I thought my father was going go berserk or start screaming, but unlike what I was expecting he simply sat and listened to me, saying very little. I let out a sigh of relief, glad that I was able to properly say everything I needed to, and slowly drift off to sleep.

I had decided to let Tuuli do whatever she needed to do in order to let her calm down as we slept, but now my eyes snap open as I realize I’m being strangled. I frantically unwind her arm from around my neck and escape from there.

I nearly died! Not even from the devouring, but from being choked to death.

As I rub my neck, I blink a few times. Ordinarily, when I wake up at night, the bedroom is usually pitch black, but now there’s a dim light filtering in. I rub my tired eyes, but this doesn’t seem to be a dream. The door is half-open, and I can tell that there’s still a fire lit in the stove. I can’t hear any voices, so I don’t think that both of my parents are still awake. Looking through the gloom, I see a dark lump on my mother’s bed; perhaps because she’s already gone to sleep.

Did she forget to put out the stove?

I quietly slip out of bed, stepping as lightly as I can to avoid waking Tuuli, and head towards the kitchen.

In the gloom of the kitchen, lit only by the flickering of the stove, my father sits alone, drinking. Unlike the happy drunkard he is in my memories, he sits there, wordlessly drinking, and crying silently.

Chapter 58: Reporting to Lutz

“You don’t have to do that, Maïne. I’ve got it,” says Tuuli. “Huh? I’ve got to do it! Aren’t you the one who told me that I’ll never learn how to do something unless I do it myself?”

Tuuli, who had previously been encouraging me to help out more so that I could work on building my own independence, thoughtlessly takes over my work. It’s unmistakeable that she’s taking even more special care of me than she already was before.

I’m woken up by Tuuli’s excited shout. “Whoa, it cleared up! We have to go pick paru today!”

The sky is still dim and gloomy, but it seems like there isn’t much snow falling at all. Tuuli had seen a little bit of light coming in through the window and thrown it open wide to check the weather, letting the freezing air outside come rushing in.

“Tuuli, I’m cold!”

“Ah! Sorry, sorry.”

She closes the window, then immediately gets started in on her breakfast. I, too, eat my breakfast, while my family noisily hustles around the house. The instant they finished their food, my mother and father started gathering up baskets and firewood. My father, starting to organize things by the entryway, looks up at me as I, still unkempt, chew on my bread.

“What will you do today, Maïne? Are you going to the gates?”

“Nuh-uh, I was thinking that I’d go and try help picking paru, maybe?”

From what Tuuli had told me, a paru tree is a beautiful and miraculous kind of plant. I’m not entirely sure what she meant when she said how it sparkles brilliantly with light as it spins around, though, so I kind of want to see it for myself. But, when my curiosity prompts me to say those words, every single member of the family turns to stare at me.

“Absolutely not! You’ll either stay here and watch the house or you’ll go

help out at the gates.”

“Picking paru is very hard, too hard for you! You’ll definitely get sick!”
“That’s right! You’re bad at climbing trees, and you can’t walk through snow so it’s impossible for you to help.”

All three of them immediately reject the idea of me accompanying them to the winter forest to pick paru. Certainly, there’s no way someone such as me, who can’t even walk through the snow to get to the gates, would be capable of foraging in a snowy forest.

“...Okay. You’ll be picking paru until noon, right? So, I’ll go to the gate and help out there while I wait for you.”

I prepare my tote bag and get myself ready to head out to the gates. I’d thought that since my father had the day off Otto might as well, but it seems that around this time of year he shows up nearly every single day.

My family loads up their baggage, including me, onto a sled, and we head off. I’d heard that everyone in the town goes to pick paru whenever they can, and based on the huge number of people dragging their sleds towards the southern gates, I’d heard correctly. The air is so cold that it bites into my skin, but everyone is filled with such excitement over being able to go and pick paru that the mood is very much like a festival. Even I am getting a little excited too.

“Sorry,” says my father to a soldier at the gate, “but take care of Maïne for me. She’ll be helping Otto out until noon.”

“Yes sir!” “Everyone, good luck picking paru!” I say.

When we arrive at the gate, I get off the sled and wave goodbye to my family as they head towards the forest. I say hello to the gatekeeper, who I’m acquainted with, and head to the night duty room.

“Mister Otto, good morning.”

“Oh? Maïne? I thought the squad leader had the day off, didn’t he?”

Otto’s eyes twinkle in wonder, and I nod, smiling slightly.

“Yes, since the weather is clear today, he went to the forest to pick paru.

I'll be helping out until noon today."

"Ahh, I see, I see. Hm, until noon, huh..."

Otto smiles broadly, seeming to immediately understand the circumstances, then starts laying out documents that he needs the calculations checked on. While he works on clearing a space for me to work, I thank him for the advice he gave me the other day.

"Mister Otto, thanks for the other day."

"Hm?" "Umm, when you consulted with me about my job prospects. I told my family about the devouring, and about finding a job that I can do from home. When spring comes, I'm thinking I'll consult with Mister Benno, too..." "Ah! Well, taking care of yourself is very important, so if Benno has no idea what you could do, then my door is always open if you'd like to ask about things you can do here." "Alright!"

I definitely notice a hint of something dark in his smile, but now that I've properly expressed my gratitude, I get to work on my calculations, feeling refreshed.

After noon, my family returns from the forest, so I get back on the sled and head home. Since there were three of them out picking today, it looks like they've brought six paru back with them. Unlike last year, now we know that even the dried-up lees is useful, so my mother is in very high spirits.

While my mother works on preparing lunch, Tuuli and I work on juicing the paru. Tuuli grabs the skinniest stick she can find from the pile of firewood, lights it in the fire from the stove, then jabs it into the fruit. In the next instant, just that little bit of the rind cracks open.

"Maïne, here it comes!"

"Got it~!"

I stick a bowl under it, so as not to waste any of the creamy white fluid that starts spilling out. Entranced by the sweet smell, we finish draining the juice, then Tuuli passes off the drained paru to our father. He crushes the pit of the fruit, pressing the oil out of it. Since he's able to lift the

heavy weight we use for pressing oil, leaving that part of the task to him means that the oil is finished in the blink of an eye. Since the lees left over after the fruit has been thoroughly squeezed has actual use in cooking, we set aside four parus' worth of it for ourselves, leaving the remaining two to give to Lutz's house in exchange for eggs.

After lunch, I head out, bringing both the paru lees and some fresh ideas for recipes. If I could only just use an oven, I could make a gratin or a pizza, but since all I have access too are a griddle and a pot, the kinds of things that I can make are sharply limited.

"Hi, Lutz. Could you trade me for some eggs, please? By the way, I came up with a new recipe, do you want to try it?"

"Yo, Maïne! I'm happy about the new recipe, but there's nobody around to help out right now so we can't start on it yet. Come on and wait in here."

Even though I finally brought them a new recipe, Lutz's older brothers aren't here, it seems.

"Where're your brothers? Did they go sledding or something, since it's clear out?"

"Those kids went out to earn a little change shoveling snow," says Lutz's mother.

I had no idea this was a thing, since there's no way I could participate, but it seems like some of the heavy labor of shoveling snow is something that kids can do in order to earn some decent pocket money.

"Why're you still here, Lutz?"

"Someone's got to juice the paru. If you wait too long, they'll melt, right?"

It's true that you can't just leave paru alone for a while, but I can't help but notice that it looks like Lutz has been stuck with the housework, unable to earn any pocket money, and I'm realizing that he's actually looking a little gloomy. But, since neither Lutz or Auntie Karla are saying anything, I figure that I, as an outsider, should probably keep my mouth

shut.

I'd at least like to help them with pressing the fruit, but since that's something that fundamentally requires actual physical labor, it's beyond my capabilities. All I can really do is watch as Lutz smashes the core with a hammer and Auntie Karla presses the oil out.

As I absent-mindedly look on, I suddenly remember that I haven't actually told Lutz about the family council. Letting him know that I won't be working at Benno's shop is something that I absolutely have to do.

"Um, so, Lutz. I've, uh, decided that I'm not going to work at Benno's shop."

"What?! Why?!"

Lutz, his hammer raised high, turns to stare at me with wide eyes. Auntie Karla looks over at me as well, her eyes open a little wider too.

"Umm... my mother mentioned something like this, right? I'd just be a burden on you. Plus, no matter how I think about it, I don't have enough stamina for a job like that. I talked with Mister Otto about it, and he pointed out a few different things."

"A few things like what?"

Lutz gradually starts moving his hammer again, urging me on with a stare.

"Right, um. So, if a brand new apprentice keeps getting fevers and has to rest all the time, what do you think everyone else that has to work with her is going to think?"

"...Ahh. That's..."

Murmuring quietly to himself like he might be starting to understand, he hits his paru. Auntie Karla, firmly pressing hers, squints.

"You'd be a bother to everyone when you're absent," she muses, "and you being absent during your training would hurt you in the long run, too..."

"That's right. ...Plus, I've still got lots of things I'm planning on making,

and if they wind up being really profitable, I'm going to earn a lot of money, you know? So if there's an apprentice that's always absent, but she still makes a ton of money, wouldn't that ruin human relations at the shop?" "You're right..."

Lutz scowls, nodding in understanding, but Karla looks a little astonished.

"Well," I say, "the bit about the money applies to you too, I think, but if you work as hard as you can, I think people's reactions will be different. I think we should discuss this with Mister Benno in detail, though."

"Yeah, let's make sure we talk to him in the spring."

I think it might be possible to keep Lutz's profits separate from his wages. Then, he could be given the extra money secretly. After all, even now, all it takes to give someone money is to tap your guild cards together.

"If you're not going to work at the shop, then what are you going to do after your baptism, Maïne?"

"In my case, I don't know what I'm going to do about the devouring, so I'd work out of my home transcribing letters or official documents while coming up with new products, or helping out at the gates... I told my family that I don't really want my lifestyle to change all that much." "Ah, okay. Yeah, that's probably better for your body."

Now that I have Lutz's support, I let out a little sigh of relief. As I do, Auntie Karla's expression suddenly brightens.

"Well, now! If Maïne's not going to work at the shop, then there's no need for you to work there either, Lutz, is there? Now you can be a craftsman!"

I tilt my head to the side, confused. What does me deciding not to work at Benno's shop have to do with Lutz not working there? Lutz, however, raises his eyebrows high as soon as he hears his mother's sigh of relief.

"Huh?! What are you saying, mom?!"

"What do you mean?" she asks, a complete lack of comprehension on

her face. Lutz clucks his tongue. "I want to be a merchant!" he yells. "Maïne has nothing to do with it! I'm the one who dragged her into it!"

She stares at him, looking as if she can't believe a word he's saying.

"What did you just say?! So, you still are planning on becoming a merchant?"

"Of course I am! I really wanted to be a trader, but after I talked with one I learned about how citizenship works, so I decided I wanted to be a merchant instead." "Lutz, why didn't you say anything about this before?!" "I did! Were you not listening, or did you just forget?!"

It looks like she really hadn't acknowledged what he'd been saying. She looks at him as if this is the first time she's ever heard this.

I, not wanting to intrude into a conversation between mother and son, watch quietly from my chair, not saying a single unnecessary word.

"...You did say that you wanted to be a trader," she says.

She shakes her head weakly, a troubled expression on her face. It's clear to see that she's bewildered by how her expectations aren't matching up with reality.

"But, that was just a childish fantasy, wasn't it? That was just something you were dreaming about, not something that had any basis in reality, wasn't it? I didn't actually think that's something you really had your sights set on. I've been thinking that you'd eventually come to your senses."

I think that what Auntie Karla is saying isn't unreasonable at all. It's rare for someone who lives in the city to go any farther than the forest or the surrounding farmland. A trader is a foreigner that unexpectedly drops in from time to time, not someone that anyone typically aspires to be. It's a childish fantasy, and he needs to wake up from it soon. Karla's line of thought is probably pretty typical of people living around here.

"...I really did want to be a trader. I want to leave this city, and go to other cities that I've never been to before. I wanted to see all sorts of things that I haven't even heard of... and I still do! I'm still holding onto

that dream.”

“Lutz, you...”

Auntie Karla rises halfway from her seat, looking like she’s about to say something. From her expression, it’s probably some sort of objection to his train of thought. However, before she can say anything, Lutz continues talking.

“But, I talked to someone who used to be a trader himself. He told me that only an idiot would give up his citizenship. And traders don’t have apprentices, so it would be impossible for me, anyway.”

“Well, he was right,” she says, looking a little bit relieved. She sits down with a thump.

It seems that being a trader is an occupation that is very much something to avoid. I’d thought, naively, that being able to travel the world and see the sights sounded really fun, but I still really haven’t internalized enough of this world’s common sense.

“So then, once I found out that I couldn’t be a trader’s apprentice, I started thinking that maybe I could just go out and be a trader on my own. Then Maïne told me that maybe instead of being a trader, I could be a merchant in this city. If I was a merchant, then I could still go to other towns to buy and sell things, she said. It’s more pragmatic, and more realistic to try to do.” She shrugs. “Well, compared to being a trader...” she says, tiredly. It seems like she had no idea that her son was serious about his plans to become a trader, so this might be a bit of a shock for her. “So, I told a merchant that I wanted to be his apprentice. He was only a second-hand acquaintance of Maïne’s, though, so he basically refused me right away.”

“...Sounds about right.”

With how the apprenticeship system works in this town, Lutz’s odds of actually becoming a merchant’s apprentice were really slim. So, probably, even though Lutz kept telling her that he wanted to be a merchant, she didn’t consider it to be any more than some half-hearted ideal. Then, working from that assumption, she might not have ever really fully

listened to Lutz when he explained that he actually would be able to do it.

“But, we got him to set out some conditions, and agree to let us apprentice under him if we met them. Maïne and I already met those conditions, so we’ve got his approval to be his apprentices. So, whether Maïne’s there or not, I’m going to be a merchant.”

Karla finally looks directly at Lutz, a serious look in her eyes, noticing at long last that Lutz has started forging his own path forward.

“...Lutz, even if you got this man’s permission to be his apprentice, did you really think you could do so if your parents disapproved?”

“I already decided that I’d do it. In the worst case, I’d be a live-in apprentice. I got him to hear me out, I got him to set some conditions, and I finally started on a path towards becoming his apprentice. I’m not gonna give that up.” “A... live-in apprentice...?”

Being a live-in apprentice is probably among the worst lifestyles you could have. First of all, as an apprentice, you can only actually work half of the week, so your wages are low. Plus, you have no family to rely on. A child suddenly forced to live on their own would find it both really physically taxing as well as time-consuming.

His living quarters would be the attic on the topmost floor of the building. Summers would be hot, and winters would be cold. It wouldn’t be at all rare for the roof to constantly leak. Carrying things upstairs, especially water, would be an enormous undertaking. It’s not unusual for birds to nest in attics, like they do in Lutz’s home, so the smell would be horrific, too. Plus, unlike the rooms rented out for families to live in, there wouldn’t be any place for Lutz to cook, so he’d need to either get someone else at the shop to let him use theirs or eat out a lot.

Naturally, that kind of lifestyle isn’t something that leaves you with any money left over. Rather, he’d need to constantly be taking advances on his pay, putting him in debt. The shop would provide the bare minimum to keep him alive, but until he grew up he would basically be living solely to work his apprenticeship.

“Lutz, think about what you’re saying! Do you really think you could live

that kind of life?!”

I don't think any normal parent would want their son to have to live such an austere life. She raises her voice so high it's practically a shriek. Lutz, however, just shrugs.

“I can, yeah. I've started preparing for that already.”

In Lutz's case, he'll be able to save up the money we're going to make from paper-making during the spring. If we use the bark that we've already got in the storehouse, we'll be able to put quite a lot of money in the bank. By my calculations, even after buying the clothing necessary to be a merchant's apprentice, he'll still have a sizable amount left over.

Plus, during his apprenticeship he'll have half of his days off, which he'll be able to spend with me, developing new products to potentially make money off of. If we can do that, then there's no doubt that he'll be making much more than an ordinary apprentice's wages. He won't have a lot of room in his budget to spare, but I think it'll definitely be much better than destitution. I don't think he'd have enough extra money to rent a place for himself, though, so he wouldn't really be able to do anything about his awful living conditions.

“...You're serious about already preparing, aren't you?”

“Very serious.”

After a long silence, Auntie Karla lets out a deep sigh, slumping her shoulders. She wears a complicated expression, like she's given up on challenging Lutz's seriousness but still can't give up altogether.

“I still think it would be better if you found a nice, steady job as a craftsman instead of something as unstable as being a merchant.” Lutz purses his lips in dissatisfaction. “...If I do what you say and become a craftsman, nothing's going to change, is it?”

Auntie Karla squints at him. Since he just effectively said he's dissatisfied with his current life, her mood quickly grows sharp.

“What do you mean by that?”

“My brothers do whatever they want with me, and when I have something they want they just take it, and I never have anything left for myself.” “That’s... you’re siblings, so of course they take things from you, but they give things too you as well, don’t they?”

She frowns, troubled. Lutz, however, immediately rejects her opinion.

“It’s not like they can give my food back after they eat it, and when I get stuff from them it’s all just broken hand-me-downs, you know? And if the hand-me-downs are too awful to actually use and I get something new for once, then they immediately take it away!”

The fact that the youngest child always gets hand-me-downs is something that’s true for me as well. However, while Tuuli is always helping me out, Lutz is constantly being ordered around by his brothers. I don’t know if that’s just what brothers do to each other, but the difference between the two of our experiences is enormous.

“I set my sights on becoming a merchant, worked really hard doing a lot of different things with Maïne, and learned what it’s like to actually hold onto something I’ve earned. I want to see how far I can take myself without anyone getting in the way. I’ve never even considered being a craftsman.”

Lutz, who has always been kept down by his family, has made it his goal to find an environment where he can be free of their control, and he was finally able to find a place where he might be able to accomplish his dreams.

Auntie Karla hangs her head. “I didn’t think you were so serious,” she says softly. “I thought this was just Maïne dragging you along...”

“I wouldn’t make this kind of life-changing decision if it was like that...”
“I really thought it was, so that’s why I was objecting.”

She lets out a long, deep sigh, looking down at the floor. She thinks to herself for a while, then slowly raises her head, a smile on her face as if she’d come to accept things as they are.

“If you’ve thought it through that far, and this is something you really

want to do, to the point where you even started preparing to leave home, then why not go for it as much as you can? Your father will probably object, but you'll have at least one supporter in this family."

"Really?! Thanks, Mom!!"

Lutz's face is practically sparkling. He had long since giving up on earning his family's understanding, so hearing something so unbelievable makes him so happy he could jump for joy. Until just a moment ago, he'd been forcing himself to look focused, but now his expression is something that a child his age should actually be wearing, and I can't help but smile, too. Having even just one family member on his side must make a whole world of difference.

When his brothers come home, Lutz is still in a good mood. The four of them work harmoniously together as they start making my new recipe.

"Zasha," I say, "could you and Zeke please heat the griddle? Lutz, please grate plenty of cheese and mix it with the paru lees. Then, Ralph, could you chop those lege leaves finely, please?"

While I divide up the work amongst the brothers, I add some paru oil and salt to the bowl that Lutz is grating cheese into. Once Ralph is done chopping the basil-like herb, I add it to the bowl, and all that's left is to mix it and grill it.

"The griddle's hot!"

"Alright, then grill this please, like how you do the parucakes."

We grill it thoroughly, until the cheese gets crispy, then eat it. It looks kind of like okonomiyaki, but thanks to the melted cheese that's holding everything together, it has a very western flavor. This recipe is a variation on something I'd come up with in my Urano days, making use of leftover cooked somen or spaghetti noodles by chopping them up really finely.

"It's so simple, but it's so filling!"

"It would be really good if you added minced ham or veggies, too," I add. "Yeah, now that I think of it, these would actually make a good meal on their own, unlike the parucakes."

Everyone eats their food, smiling happily about how delicious it is. In the middle of that, Ralph tries to help himself to seconds off of Lutz's plate, but Auntie Karla smacks him in the back of his head.

"Don't take other people's food. That's greedy! How about you grill another for yourself?"

Ralph, who had just gotten smacked on the head, looks at her with mild shock. Lutz does, too. After a moment, Ralph gets up to start grilling up his seconds, and Lutz goes back to eating, relieved. Karla watches the two of them, then smiles. Now that Lutz has convinced someone as influential as her of his problems with the rest of the family, it looks like things have calmed down around here, at least for now.

After that, I return to being a shut-in. My life becomes an endless cycle of handiwork, tutoring Lutz, helping at the gate, and lying in bed with a cold, while Lutz keeps stopping by to deliver hairpin parts, be tutored, and occasionally bringing completed product over to Benno's shop.

Eventually, the snow starts gradually getting weaker, and my wintry shut-in lifestyle comes to an end.

Chapter 59: Working Towards Resuming Paper-Making

The snow has begun to melt, and the days have grown clearer. The days are still cold, but my family has said it's no problem for me to go out to Benno's shop, so Lutz and I get ready to make our way there to settle the final accounts for our winter's handiwork. Each person who helped with the work has entrusted me with a small bag to put their earnings into. I put these into my tote bag, along with the last completed hairpins, and we head towards the shop.

Traces of winter still remain: the center of the main road has been cleared of snow, but in the corners of the alleyways there's still some snowmen that have yet to melt, and along the sides of the road there are still mountains of snow that had melted a little bit and then refrozen hard. The faces of everyone who has gone out to meet the new spring are bright, and their footsteps are buoyant as they go to and fro along the streets. The number of carts and carriages on the main road has significantly increased as well.

It looks like the number of people visiting Benno's shop is much higher than normal, so even though we've arrived in the afternoon, where there are usually comparatively few people present, it seems extremely busy. As I ask Lutz if it might be best for us to come back later, Mark appears, walking towards us. It seems as if one of the employees that we've become acquainted with might have noticed us and called him over.

"Good afternoon," I say. "It's good to finally see you again, Mister Mark."

"Ah, Lutz and Maïne! Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

Mark raises his right fist in front of his chest, then presses his left palm to it, fingers together, slightly bowing his head. I have no idea whatsoever what he could possibly be doing, so Lutz and I stare wide-eyed at him.

"Uh? What was that?"

“...It’s the way you greet someone in the new spring?”

Judging by Mark’s tone of voice, he doesn’t know how we couldn’t know what that was, so I can guess that this is some sort of extremely obvious greeting that is exchanged around here.

“This is the first time I’ve heard it. Lutz, did you know about this?”

“No, it’s my first time, too.”

If Lutz hasn’t heard of it, then it may be something unique to this particular part of the city, or perhaps it’s something occupationally-related.

“...Is this maybe a greeting only merchants use?”

“It is something that has always been done in my family,” Mark replies, “so I haven’t given it much consideration, but all of the socialization I have done outside of work has been with other merchants, so that might be entirely possible. Since business booms as the snow thaws, we wish blessings upon the thawing of the snow, and greet our fellows by wishing that the goddess of spring brings them great favor.”

Having said that, he teaches us this merchant’s greeting. It looks like this is a greeting you give the first time you meet someone in the spring. I’m just going to file this away as something similar to “happy new year”.

As Mark did a moment ago, I put my right fist in front of my chest, press my left hand against it, and try practicing the greeting.

“Blessings upon the thawing of the snow...?”

“That’s right,” he says. “May the goddess of spring bring you great favor, I think.”

I quietly mutter it to myself over and over, but I’m fairly confident I will have completely forgotten about this by tomorrow. It’s times like this that really remind me that I very much want a notepad. I may have a slate tucked in my tote bag, but that’s not a notepad.

“The master is presently conducting a negotiation. What matters of business might you need to speak with him about?”

In response, I start ticking off the things I'd like to do today on my fingers.

"Umm, first I would like to settle accounts regarding our winter handiwork. Next, since I'd like to resume paper-making as quickly as possible, I'd like to verify whether or not the craftsman has finished making the larger bamboo mats by now. Also, I would like to speak with Mister Benno about my apprenticeship, but it seems he's currently busy?"

"I understand. Very well; let us begin with settling your winter's handiwork. He should finish his business while we work."

He guides us to a small table inside the shop. Lutz and I sit down next to each other, and Mark seats himself opposite us.

"These are the last of the hairpins we made for our handiwork, if you please," says Lutz, speaking in much more polite language than he's used to using.

He presents the bag containing the hairpins. Mark removes them from the bag to count them.

"There are twenty-four here," he says. "Including the ones you left with us during the winter, this makes a total of one hundred and eighty-six, is that correct?"

"Yes sir, that is correct." Lutz nods, having verified Mark's final count matches the tally we had made on a small board.

Each hairpin is worth five medium copper coins. From that, the handling fee Lutz and I are charging will be deposited directly into the guild. Then I take out the various bags that I'd brought with me in order to make distributing the rest of the money easier, and start dividing it up.

To make sure that Lutz's brothers don't fight, we divide their share evenly across the three of them, excluding Lutz. Splitting it up is easy: each of them gets six large and two medium copper coins. As for my family, my mother made eighty-three, Tuuli made sixty-six, and I made thirty seven. Since these numbers are all over the place, splitting it up is a bit of a pain. My mother winds up with one small silver, six large copper,

and six medium copper coins. Tuuli's share is one small silver, three large copper, and two medium copper coins, and my share is seven large and four small copper coins.

"With this number of pins, we should have stock to last us until next winter," says Mark. "There's quite a lot of demand for these! Since there are so many colors to choose from, our customers seem to enjoy themselves picking theirs out."

I smile, imagining a parent and child picking out a hairpin together.

"Ah, is that so? I'm glad," I say. "I made myself a hairpin as well, you know!"

"How might it be decorated?" I giggle. "That will be a secret until the day of the ceremony." Mark quirks an eyebrow. "Oh my," he says. "Then, I shall look forward to seeing it on that day. Now then, you next wished to discuss the resuming of your paper-making, did you not?" "That's correct," I say. "We won't be able to actually resume work until Lutz has had the opportunity to visit the forest and check on the state of the river, but since spring has come, I think that I would like to start as soon as possible."

Benno's investment will only continue until the early summer, when our baptismal ceremony will be held. Thus, I'd like to resume our work as soon as we can.

Mark nods slightly. "Very well. I shall ask the workshop about your order. If I'm correct, you wished for two bamboo mats, the size of a contract sheet?"

"Yes, sir, thank you very much."

I notice several merchants leaving the back room, as if the negotiations taking place there finished at about the same time we had finished our discussion out here.

"I shall go inform the master of your presence. Please, wait one moment."

After he momentarily disappears into the back room, he returns to lead us in. Since this is the first time I'm meeting Benno this spring, I promptly

press my left palm into my right fist in front of my chest, delivering the greeting I'd memorized.

"Mister Benno, it is good to see you again. Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. Oh, um... may the goddess of spring's, um, great favor... huh?"

As I struggle to remember something I'd heard just a moment ago without the aid of a notepad, Lutz looks at me in amazement. He steps in front of me, pressing his left palm into his right fist in front of his chest.

"Master Benno, blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

"Aha, yes, that! Blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor."

Thanks to Lutz jogging my memory, I deliver the proper greeting. Benno, visibly trying not to laugh, returns our greeting.

"Ahh, blessings upon the thawing of the snow. May the goddess of spring bring you great favor. ...I have to say," he says, chuckling, "that was a very sloppy greeting. Make sure you learn to say it correctly."

He taps the table with his finger, beckoning Lutz and I to sit down. We do so, and then talk about the spring well-wishing.

"That was something we just learned from Mark a little earlier, you know. It's not something either of us heard growing up, so say something like, 've ry good for your first try', please!"

"...Oh, is that so? Then, good work, Lutz. Now then, you wanted to talk about your apprenticeship?"

Benno only praised Lutz, who'd completely remembered the greeting. I pout, briefly, before launching into today's main question.

"I won't be apprenticing here after my baptism," I say. "Huh? ...Wait. Why are you saying this? Is it because I didn't praise you just now? Well, you didn't say it right, but at least you tried?"

He rubs hard on his temples, uncomprehendingly, and forces out some praise for my greeting.

“That’s not it! It has nothing to do with that.”

“If not that, then what?” “Umm, well, I’m kind of weak, you know?”
“Astoundingly so, yes.”

His interjection stabs straight into my heart.

“Urgh... You were worried earlier about whether or not I’d be able to properly do my work here, weren’t you? If you had an apprentice who was always taking days off because of her poor health and was only being assigned easy work that wouldn’t put a strain on her body then, if you think about it, wouldn’t that be bad for human relations here at the shop?”

“Is that all?”

He glares down at me with his reddish-brown eyes, and I remember the other concerns that Otto had raised with me.

“Also, if I’m earning profits from my goods, then isn’t there the chance that I’d be making more money than even the veterans who’ve been working here for over ten years? Money’s the easiest way to ruin relationships.”

“Who told you that?” he says, eyes narrowed. “There’s no way you would have come up with that on your own.”

I nod vigorously. Back when I was Urano, the only thing I ever did or ever really wanted to do was read, so my field of view was pretty narrow. This time around, I hadn’t really been considering anything but my own physical strength. It took Otto pointing things out for me to start thinking about human relations.

“Mister Otto,” I reply. “...I see.”

Huh? I think his voice just now was pitched a fraction of a step lower... And then, he’s got a sort of predatory aura going on now... or am I imagining things?

I tilt my head slightly to the side as I think about Benno’s ferocious aura, then say the thing that’s been weighing most heavily on my mind.

“Also, you know about my devouring, right? If I were making the decision, then I don’t think I’d hire an employee that I wasn’t sure would still be around in a year.”

It’s very likely that any resources spent on my education will go entirely to waste. I don’t think a merchant would be capable of wasting resources like that.

Benno rubs his forehead, looking at me with sharply discerning eyes.

“Then, if you’re not working at my shop, what do you plan to do instead?”

“I’ll be transcribing letters or official documents at home, working with Lutz to develop new products on his days off, and from time to time helping out at the gates... basically, I’ll just keep doing what I’ve been doing. After talking with my family, I’ve decided that it’s best for me to do things that don’t place too much of a strain on my body.” “And being an apprentice and so on would. Got it.”

The strain goes out of his eyes and shoulders. He rubs at his temples, looking like he’s trying to figure out what he’s going to do next. As he mutters to himself, I speak up again.

“Umm, Mister Benno. Do you have any work that I might be able to do at home?”

In that moment, Benno’s eyes gleam, and a slow, predatory smile spreads across his face.

“Your writing is very neat, hm. I can send some amanuensis work your way, so stop by with Lutz from time to time. Alright?”

“Thank you very much.”

What was that just now? I feel like I’ve just been cornered by a carnivorous beast...

Since my request was accepted so easily, I put aside my deep thoughts and move onto my other question.

“Umm, so if that’s the case, what’s going to happen to my guild card?

I'm planning on selling through Lutz, but I'm not going to have an apprentice's card from your shop, right? I'll be unaffiliated, right?"

We had originally planned around my eventual registration as an apprentice at Benno's shop after my baptism, but if I'm not actually going to be his apprentice, then I wonder what will happen to my guild card? Since it'll be after my baptism, I don't think they'll let me have a temporary registration. However, if I'm not attached to a shop, I won't be able to conduct any business without being registered.

"I don't know what kind of products you're planning on making, but how about we call the storehouse you've been using 'Maine's Workshop', register you as the workshop head, and get you a card that way? If you enter into an exclusive production agreement with my shop, then our business won't be much different from how it is now."

"Workshop head?! That sounds kinda cool! If everything will be more or less the same as it is now, then yes, please, let's set it up like that."

I clap my hands excitedly, and Benno nods happily.

"So," I say, "this is something that I mentioned to Mister Mark, but we're going to be restarting our paper making as soon as we can go look at the river's current condition. We're currently planning on the two of us making the paper until our baptisms, but after that Lutz will be busy with his apprenticeship and I won't be doing an apprenticeship at all, so I'm hoping that we'll be able to pass the entire task on to a workshop you select. Is that okay?"

"When you say the entire task, do you mean that you'll still be the one picking the workshop? Is that right?"

Our magic contract stipulated that Lutz and I would be able to have safe, stable employment at Benno's shop. Since this is turning into a new industry, I think the people and the workshop making it would be particularly important to Benno. For me, however, I won't have either salary or extra profit, so as long as a large amount of paper winds up in circulation, I don't particularly care who winds up making it.

"I mean, I don't know anything about workshops, and I also don't know

anyone who might want to work on making paper. All I know is that since the process requires soaking tree bark in a river, it would probably be best for the workshop to be near the river, I think.”

“Near the river, huh... that’ll be difficult. How are you doing it now?” Lutz shrugs. “Right now, we’re carrying all of our equipment to the river bank in the forest, but doing that every day is really hard... oh, um, difficult, sir.” “If you think about scaling things up for mass production,” I say, “then the equipment will need to be much bigger, so transporting it to the river will be next to impossible, I think? Well, thinking about that is probably a job for you, Mister Benno, or the people at the workshop.” “... Hmm, you’re right.”

Since it looks like Benno has understood, I’ll just leave selecting a workshop and sourcing the tools to him.

“Please take care of selecting a workshop, getting the equipment, and finding suppliers for the materials before our baptisms. As the actual day of the ceremony gets closer, Lutz will go and instruct the workers in the actual manufacturing process.”

“Me?!”

Lutz’s eyes go wide, and he gapes like a fish. I smile sweetly, giving him a big nod.

“I mean, aren’t there steps that I can’t do myself? I think it would be best for you to show them how to do it in person. If after spending the entire spring doing it over and over you’re still uneasy about it, then I can go with you too, so you’ll be fine!”

“You’re really passing the entire task off, aren’t you,” says Benno, with an amused chuckle.

I glance guiltily to the side. I’m definitely well aware that I’m seriously shirking a lot of responsibility here. However, more than just making prototypes, improving distribution, and setting up mass production, I already want to be setting my sights on the next project. If I spend all my time fussing over the particulars of making paper, then I’ll never actually get to making books, no matter how much time I spend. This spring, I

want to make enough paper for me to use, and then turn my attention towards printing.

“Then, please excuse us.”

With my heart full of my time-limited ambitions, I depart from Benno’s office.

The next day, the fast-working Mark delivers new bamboo paper mats to our storehouse. Hearing that, Lutz takes the opportunity to check on the condition of the river when he heads to the forest for his gathering.

“Lutz, how’d it look? You think we can make paper?”

“There’s a little more water flowing than usual from all the snow thawing, but not more than we’d get after a heavy rain, I think.”

And, with that judgement, we officially resume making paper. First thing in the morning on the following day, Lutz fetches the key, then we immediately head off for the storehouse. As we walk along the alleyways, still cold enough that you need a coat, I spend my time thinking about the day’s work.

To start with, when we get to the warehouse, we’ll check to see if the outer bark we’d harvested from the tronbay back in the autumn and left out to dry is still alright. If it is, then we’ll start by working on stripping that down to its inner bark. While that happens, I’d like to use the preserved folin inner bark to start making actual paper.

“I’d really like it if we could wait for the water to get a little warmer, though...” I say. “Yeaah, you’re right. But, if you keep in mind that we’re trying to save up money, the sooner we start the better.”

Benno’s support for our paper-making enterprise is only going to last until the day of our baptismal ceremony. Until then, we want to do as much as we can to earn as much as possible.

“I wonder if the tronbay bark’s going to be alright...?” I say, wondering aloud. “That’s been airing out this entire time, so it’s probably going to be completely dried out by now.”

“It wasn’t drying in the sun, so I’ve been really worried about mold growing all over it!”

Since we left it alone all winter, it’s only natural that it would have completely dried out by now, but whether or not it dried in a way that we actually want is another question entirely.

“There aren’t really any molds that grow on tronbay,” says Lutz.

He may be shrugging it off, but since we completely skipped the sun-drying part of the process altogether, I can’t help but worry.

We arrive at the storehouse and unlock the door. With a creak, the door opens. Through the gloom and the dust, dark, wavy strips of material hang from the shelves like strands of seaweed, giving the entire place a supremely ominous air.

“Is it really going to be okay?” I ask. “I think I’m a little worried now,” Lutz replies.

I prod at a strip of outer bark, finding that it’s completely dried out. Since the outer bark itself is dark, I can’t really tell from the color alone whether or not it has mold growing on it.

“How about we bring these to the forest and try soaking them in the river for now?” I mutter to myself.

“What all are we going to bring to the forest today?” asks Lutz, sweeping dust off of the wooden box with back straps that he’d left in here. “Umm... Lutz, how about you bring the pot and some ash? And, hm, I don’t think we’ll need something as big as a tub, but maybe we should bring a bucket as well. It would be kinda bad if we couldn’t find any firewood in the forest, so maybe we should bring some with us? I’ll bring this outer bark and this preserved folin inner bark, and my ‘chopsticks’, too.”

“I don’t get why we need a bucket, but if you say we need it I’ll bring it.”

I gather up the dried tronbay outer bark and the folin inner bark from where we’d hung it in the warehouse, fetch the pair of cooking chopsticks Lutz had made for me, grab a few dust rags, and put it all in a basket. The two of us strap our supplies onto our back, and rush off to where the other

children are meeting to get ready to go to the forest.

We all arrive at the forest, and as the other kids scatter about to go foraging, Lutz and I head for the riverbank. Lutz starts getting the pot ready right next to the river. He sets it down on a stove made of piled-up rocks, then uses the bucket to fill it up with river water.

“Oh,” he says, “if we use this then we don’t have to get soaked when we get water from the river. I knew you had a good reason!”

If you want to fill up the heavy pot with water directly from the river, then you’ve basically got no choice but to get in the river yourself. It seems like Lutz hadn’t quite been thinking ahead that far.

Now that the pot’s full of water, we use the firewood that we brought to get a fire started. While we wait for the water to boil, I want to start soaking the outer bark in the river, if possible.

“Wow, that looks cold,” mutters Lutz, staring at the river, swollen with water from melting snow.

If we want to make sure that the bark doesn’t wash away as it soaks, we need to build a circle of rocks to put it in. The one that we had made during the fall, however, has fallen apart, and only about half of it remains. Our first step thus has to be building a new stone circle.

“You can do it, Lutz!”

“Eek! Cold!!”

Lutz squawks as he wades into the river of ice water. If I were to go in myself, I’d almost certainly get another fever and my family would probably bar me from leaving the house for a while, so basically the only thing I can be doing to help is to cheer him on.

For Lutz’s sake, I walk around the area, gathering up fallen firewood. While I’m in the middle of that, though, he calls out for me.

“Maïne, bring the bark over!”

“On it~!”

As soon as the bark’s in the circle, Lutz leaps out of the river, running to

the stove to warm himself up with the fire. He holds his bright-red hands up to the fire, rubbing them vigorously together. I fill up the bucket with some warm water from the pot, then set it down in front of him.

“Put your hands and feet in here. If you don’t warm them up, you’ll get frostbite!”

“...Ah, warm... this feels great!”

He sticks his hands and feet into the bucket of warm water, heaving a sigh of relief. The hot water starts cooling down almost immediately, but thanks to that foot bath, it looks like his body’s warming up a bit.

Chapter 60: Vested Interests

The next day, we need to bring in the bark from the river and strip the dark outer bark down to the light inner bark, so we bring the board, pot, and bucket with us. Sitting by the fire (and, occasionally, dipping our hands in the hot water to warm up), we use our knives to strip down the bark.

“I have to say it: I don’t want to be doing this when it’s not summer. My fingers are completely numb right now,” I say. “You can say that again,” replies Lutz. “Going into the river is awful.”

As we grumble, we force ourselves to keep our hands steady, and work our way towards finishing up the tronbay inner bark. Even now that we’re stripping it down, I’m still not seeing any spots on it that look like it might be mold, so I let myself breathe a sigh of relief.

“...Doesn’t look like any mold grew on it after all. I’m glad!”

“I mean, the folin’s one thing, but didn’t I tell you that the tronbay was going to be okay?” “It’s a pretty dangerous plant, huh?”

After we finish stripping the bark, we go foraging in the forest. Since it seems that there are a lot of medicinal plants that only grow during this season, Lutz and I go together, him teaching me as we go.

“Hey, Lutz. Why aren’t we picking up this red fruit here? Is it poisonous?”

I notice that Lutz avoids a fruit that hangs along our path as we walk past. It’s red, and about the size of the first knuckle of an adult’s thumb. I’d have to guess that this fruit is somehow dangerous. I point at it, careful not to touch it, and ask Lutz about it.

“Ahh, it’s better to just leave tau fruit alone. Basically, all that’s in there is water. You can’t eat it, so if you bring it home all it does is dry out, so there’s not really any use for them right now.”

“What do you mean, right now?” “Oh, in the summer, they grow about as big as your fist, and when they hit something, they explode and send

water everywhere, so then we all chuck them at each other.”

It seems like I should look at these as some sort of naturally-occurring water balloon. Since all it would do is wither if we brought it home, it seems like it would be best to leave it alone, otherwise it won't grow any bigger.

That's a weird fruit.

“All the kids and adults in the town come together and have a big fruit fight using these. Man, isn't the Star Festival great?”

I've been here at least a year, but I can't recall anything about this particular festival at all.

“...Hey, Lutz, I haven't heard anything about this Star Festival, though? It sounds like some sort of summer festival... thing?”

“Oh, around that time, you were basically dying, weren't you? I wanted to invite you, but your mom said your fever wasn't going down at all. I brought your bamboo strips around after that.”

Ahh, around then, huh?

Based on what he's saying, I can figure out which time in particular I was in the process of dying. My mokkan got burned up, which prompted the first episode in which I can clearly remember feeling like I was being swallowed alive by the devouring. Since it seems like I was totally unconscious for quite a few days, and stuck in bed for a while after that, even if there was a festival, going to it would have been completely out of the question. I'd guess that my family didn't go, either.

“Tuuli probably wanted to go, but I guess she didn't because of me, huh?”

I might be robbing Tuuli of her opportunities to make happy childhood memories! I hang my head as I think about that, but Lutz just shrugs, shaking his head.

“Nah, your mom stayed to keep an eye on you, so Tuuli got to participate. Ralph and I picked a lot of tau so that we could team up

against her.”

“Oh, really? That’s a relief.” “It would be great if you could make it out this year, Maïne!” “Yeah!”

I promise him that I’ll keep an eye on my health so I can participate in the Star Festival, and we finish up our foraging. Even though I made that promise, however, I have no idea whether or not my parents would allow me to participate in a festival that involved chucking water balloons at each other.

From the next day on, we work out of the warehouse. At this point it’s turned into work that we have to have warm water nearby to constantly warm up our hands in, but we get to work on making paper out of folin, using the new contract-sized bamboo paper mats. As we let that paper dry over the course of a few days, we start working on making paper out of the tronbay inner bark.

“The folin paper’s pretty dry, now. I think it’s because today was super clear.”

“The tronbay paper should be dry after tomorrow, maybe?”

As I check on the manufacturing process, I take the twenty-six sheets of folin paper and split them evenly with Lutz. As he takes his thirteen sheets from me, he frowns, troubled.

“Hey, Maïne. Why are you splitting it up here? Isn’t it just fine to split up the money after we’ve brought all of the paper to Master Benno?”

“I mean, what I really want is the actual finished product. It would be wrong for me to keep paper that Benno bought us the materials for, it’s okay for me to keep the stuff that we made from materials we gathered ourselves, right?”

If I were to sell paper to Benno and then buy it back, he’d take his 30% commission off the top. In that case, it’s better for me to just not sell it to him in the first place.

“So you’re not going to sell any?”

“I’ll sell just half of it. I’m gathering paper so that I can make a book!”

Now that we’ve not just established the proper formula but have also started growing increasingly familiar with the actual manufacturing process, our success rate is starting to increase, meaning that we’re producing fewer and fewer failures. That makes my end goal of making a book more complicated. My mother has told me so many stories by now that recording all of them is going to be a huge task.

After completing our work, we immediately head to Benno’s shop to bring him our finished paper, bringing the key to the warehouse along with us.

“Oh, it’s done?”

Benno takes the two stacks of folin paper from Lutz and I, then counts them. Lutz’s stack has thirteen sheets, and mine has six. He frowns, noticing the blatant difference in number.

“Maïne, you’ve got way less in here. Why’s that?”

“Because what I ultimately want is the paper, I’ve kept some for myself. Of course, this wouldn’t be paper made from materials for which you paid, but from materials we gathered ourselves; that should be alright, is it not?” “...Hm, sure. I don’t particularly care about what you do with your own materials, but what exactly are you going to be using all that paper for?”

He wears a slightly guarded expression as he asks me that question.

“I’m going to be making a book. That’s why I want paper.”

“A book? ...Why’re you making one of those? To sell?” “Huh? I just want one to read myself, though...?”

Benno and I exchange strange looks, collectively tilting our heads to the side. There’s no way that Benno, who can’t comprehend using such a high-value good as paper to make something not for sale, and I, who just wants a book and doesn’t actually care about the material value, could understand each other.

“Well, whatever. Paper this size will sell for one large silver coin. My commission is thirty percent, so, how much is your share?”

Lutz doesn't really understand percentages yet. As he stammers, frantically trying to work out the math, I quickly respond with the correct answer.

“Seven small silver coins, sir.”

“What?!” yells Lutz. “Seven small silver coins?! Wh... th... that's too much, isn't it?!”

Lutz, upon hearing a number so completely beyond his expectations, gapes at me in sheer shock.

“...Lutz, calm down. I know it sounds like a lot of money for us to be earning, but we're only going to be seeing profits for this until our baptismal ceremonies, you know? If you think about how much money Mister Benno is going to be making off of this paper from now on, this is really a pretty tiny amount, so don't worry about it.”

“Don't worry about it? You...”

I'd tried to calm him down, but his eyes start rolling around in his head in pure uncomprehending shock.

“Since you're selling thirteen sheets,” I say to him, “you'll be getting nine large and one small silver coins. I'm selling six, so I'll get four large and two small silver coins.”

“Uh, when you say 'nine large silver coins' there's no way I can hear that and think that's a 'pretty tiny amount', right?” “Hm? Then, should we reduce the selling price?”

I incline my head slightly to the side in doubt, looking at Lutz as he seems to be paralyzed with fear, as I make my suggestion. However, Benno, still sitting in front of us, smiles at us wryly, shaking his head while he rejects our suggestion.

“We can't sell it for any lower. We'd just be creating needless strife with some people who have vested interests in the field. Let's keep it at the

same price for now. When this starts actually circulating around the market, I'll start thinking about changing the selling price. Hey, if you're scared of that much money, how about I increase my commission?"

That last bit he aimed directly at Lutz, grinning broadly.

"We don't have any say in how much it gets sold for," I say, "so we'll leave determining the actual sale price to you, Mister Benno, but I won't agree to any change to your commission. Hey, Lutz. If you don't need that money, how about you give it to me?"

"As if I'd give it to either of you!" he yells. "I was just a little shocked at how much money it was, that's all!"

Lutz clutches his guild card tightly to his chest. Since guild cards are bound to their owner by blood, it's impossible for anyone but the actual owner to use them. It's a perfectly safe place to keep your money.

"If you store it with the guild, then you don't have to look at the cash itself, so it's not so scary, is it?"

"Crap, I'm kinda jealous how weirdly shameless you are about all this, Maïne." "Whoa, shameless?! That's meaaan!"

In my Urano days, I saved my money in the bank. Then, in this world, I'd earned entire small gold coins, and then spent basically all of them paying for that magic tool, so I guess I'm just pretty used to the movement of large sums of money by now. There's no way I'm being shameless about it.

As I sulk, I reach out to tap guild cards with a broadly grinning Benno, settling our accounts. I get five large copper coins in cash from him to bring back to my family. Lutz does the same, getting some coins for his family, and we finish up our transactions.

A few days later, when Lutz goes to retrieve the key for the warehouse, he comes back carrying a letter and a fairly large package. More accurately, it's not a letter, but a wooden board upon which an invitation has been written. In the package are a couple hooded coats, designed to be pulled on over the head like some kind of poncho.

"What are these?" asks Lutz, frowning at his differently-colored poncho.

I look over our written invitation. It succinctly lists the time, place, and reason for the meeting.

“It says that we’re to meet in the central plaza at the fourth bell for the purpose of purchasing clothing,” I say. “Huh? Clothes?”

“...It says that there are people who have come to voice objections to the paper we’ve made. While the sender of the invitation wants to meet with them to discuss a possible resolution, it seems that it would be best for us to not stand out so that our existence doesn’t become known. Since our appearances don’t blend in at the shop, we’re to wear these when we go to meet with the sender.” “Uh? What the heck is this?! This sounds really dangerous, right?”

The two of us slip the ponchos on over our heads to try them on. They’re very warm, and cover our clothing entirely. For now, it seems that it’s best to cover up our raggedy clothing. When we raise the hoods, both our hair and our faces are hidden, so when we’re walking around we should keep them up. My hairpin, it seems, is very conspicuous.

“I don’t know whether or not it’s actually dangerous, but since we’re going to be meeting Mister Mark, how about we make sure we bring in the tronbay paper beforehand so that we can sell it while we’re at it? Oh, although, maybe it would be better if we weren’t weren’t walking around with it when we were just told we shouldn’t stand out?”

I start checking on the state of the tronbay paper, but Lutz suddenly gets really mad.

“Maïne, why’re you so relaxed about this?!”

“Huh? I mean, I basically already expected that a new product like this would run against someone else’s vested interests. I guess it’s a little sooner than I would have thought, though...” “‘Vested interests’?”

Lutz frowns, repeating the unfamiliar term.

“Some person (or people) who already have rights to earn profits from something. Mister Benno mentioned it yesterday, you know? That if we lowered the prices we’d be creating strife. If I had to guess, this time it’s

the people who make parchment.”

“What do the parchment makers have to do with it? Our paper is made from wood, so they’re not related at all, right?”

If you just look at the manufacturing process, they’re completely unrelated, but both the end use and the level of the clientele are exactly the same. Until now, there was nothing at all that could threaten the parchment makers’ profits, so the sudden appearance of a previously unknown kind of paper has probably sent them into a panic, I think.

“Ummm, so, if nobody but them could make any sort of paper, then no matter how expensive they made it, everyone would still have no choice but to buy parchment if they wanted to write contracts, you know? But, if a new kind of paper showed up, then that new paper could steal some of their existing customers, see?”

“Ahh, I guess you’re right.”

Lutz nods, seeming to understand. If a new product that’s good for the same thing appears, then of course some customers would be drawn away towards the new thing.

“If that’s the case, then they couldn’t take in the same proceeds, you know? And they wouldn’t like that. Plus, if we got to the point where we could sell a lot of paper, then the sale price would start going down, too.”

“Huh, really?”

I draw a graph on my slate. I mark two lines for the X and Y axes, then draw two intersecting curves as simple representations of supply and demand, and then start to explain their connection.

“So, this graph shows how ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ are connected. This line’s the ‘supply curve’, and this one’s the ‘demand curve’. ‘Supply’ is the amount of a good exists, and ‘demand’ is the number of people wanting to buy it.”

“Ahh,” he replies. “If there’s lots of people who want to buy a good, and there’s not enough of it on the market to sell, then the price of that good goes up.”

As I explain the importance of the left side of the two curves, he seems to understand. “Ah, if there’s a shortage you can charge as much as you want,” he murmurs.

“Then, as more of the good is able to be sold, then the people who want it can start buying it, and then you’re left with fewer people who want it, you know? So then, the price starts to go down.”

As I explain, I slide my finger along the curves, until I reach the intersection point in the middle.

“If there’s more goods available than people who want to buy it, then no matter how much of it you put out for sale you won’t actually be able to sell it, you know? In that case, then the price will just get lower and lower, right?”

As I keep dragging my finger right, the supply and demand curve completely switch places on the Y-axis.

“Do you get it? Just because of the fact that we’re able to make paper, prices are going to start dropping. Since the parchment makers aren’t going to want to reduce the price of parchment, and they want to maintain the same amount of profit that they had before, they had to voice objections over a new kind of paper entering the market.”

“Hey, isn’t that really bad, though?” he asks, anxiously. I shake my head, smiling. “Since Mister Benno’s telling us to keep ourselves hidden, what he’s really saying is that it’s okay to leave taking these people on to him. It’ll be fine, don’t worry about it. ...Although I don’t know exactly what’s going on since I haven’t been told about it in any detail.”

By the time our meeting time comes around, we’re able to finish twenty-four sheets of tronbay paper, but since we’re waiting to see what the actual plan is, we leave it behind in the storehouse.

“Lutz, put your hood up too, for now, so that way they won’t be able to recognize your face or your hair color.”

The fact that Benno went as far as to send us clothes to wear means that there’s no way that there’s zero chance we might get caught up in

something dangerous. As we nervously wait in the central plaza, the fourth bell rings, and Mark comes to meet us.

“Thank you for waiting,” he says. “As promised, shall we go acquire the clothing you’ll need as apprentices?”

“Yes please, Mister Mark.”

Since I’m not going to become an apprentice, I don’t actually need the clothes, but if I’m going to be coming and going from Benno’s shop, then it might be a good idea for me to have clothing that won’t stand out. I contemplate whether or not this is actually a waste of money as we walk, leading Mark to mistakenly believe that I might not be in peak form and scoop me up into his arms.

“I can walk on my own?!” I protest. “Ah; I had heard you moaning, so I had merely grown somewhat anxious. Please, for the sake of my own peace of mind, let me carry you.”

“I was just thinking while I walked. There’s nothing wrong with my health!”

His smile not faltering in the least, Mark speeds up his pace just a little bit. It seems like he’s of a mind to completely ignore any of my arguments.

“Then, please feel free to think to your heart’s content.”

“Luuutz!” I whine. “This’ll be way faster, so stay like that,” he says.

With my plea for Lutz’s help struck down so firmly, I cease my struggling.

Grr, why do I feel like I’m surrounded by my enemies!

The three of us enter a clothing store, and the shopkeeper comes out to greet us with a smile. Both the employees and the clients here are all dressed sharply in elegant clothing. If Lutz and I had come to a store like this on our own, we’d have been shooed away immediately.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Mister Mark? Welcome! Are these new apprentices?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’d like to place an order for two sets of clothing, if you would.”

This may be the shop that Mark buys all of the apprentices' clothing from, as with just that brief request the shopkeeper smiles and nods.

"Huh?" I say. "Two sets... is that one for me, too?"

Lutz, of course, needs a set, but I'm certainly not becoming an apprentice. However, Mark simply nods, his smile as polite and constant as ever.

"When you come and go from the shop looking like you do now, no matter what you do you wind up standing out. I'm terribly sorry, but I'll still be having clothing prepared for you as well. Even if you won't be working as an apprentice, you will still be visiting our shop, so I think it will be handy for you to have at least one set of clothes for yourself."

"...You're right, I guess."

I'm not going to be an apprentice, but since I'm going to be working on developing new goods and am going to need to consult with Benno about both my earnings as well as whatever work he gives me to do at home, it's likely that the frequency with which I visit the shop won't actually change much from where we are now. Even worse, next to Lutz's pristine apprentices' garb, my worn-out clothes will just look all the more pitiful. Since I have some cash to spare right now, it might indeed be best for me to have some clothes made.

Lutz is pulled deeper into the shop ahead of me, stripped down to his underwear, and measured all over. I'm pulled into a different room, and stripped down as well. Even just after having all sorts of measurements taken here and there, I'm left extremely worn out.

"The advance fee will be one small silver coin."

"Alright," I reply.

We order everything apprentices need to wear, from top to bottom, including shoes, then use our guild cards to pay them one small silver coin. Just like Benno had said, the final total will be a little less than ten small silver coins. With that, it seems we'll have a complete set of apprentices' clothes.

After we finish our clothing order, Mark leads us to Benno's shop. There, we find Benno staring at our paper with a bit of a glare, but when he sees the two of us, his expression softens.

"Ah, you're here? It looks like things have gotten somewhat bothersome, so I'm being vigilant, even if I wonder if I might be going a little overboard. You two, be as vigilant as you can, too. Don't let your guard down. These people could be anywhere, and I have no idea what they'll do now that their interests are at stake."

It seems like Benno's being a little overcautious, but he just tells us not to be unprepared for people whose interests we're affecting. Since the two of us are still unbaptized children, he adds, if we're wearing apprentices' clothes, then he thinks we shouldn't draw anyone's attention, even if we're loitering around the shop.

"You'd written 'vested interests' on that board; so is this the parchment makers, then?"

"That's right. The parchment makers' association has filed a complaint with the merchant's guild, it seems." "With the merchant's guild?"

I tilt my head to one side, not exactly certain what the relation between the parchment makers' association and the merchant's guild could be. Benno gives a simple explanation of how the guild's jobs includes protecting vested interests, resolving strife caused by new enterprises, and mediating disputes.

"It seems that the complaint they lodged last evening was that there's someone making paper who wasn't a member of the parchment makers' association and wasn't paying them their dues. They contacted me, demanding to manage our activities, saying we're outlaws arbitrarily doing things of our own accord."

"Huh," I say, "and then?"

There's no way that Benno would just quietly lie down and give up. He'd probably try to find some point of compromise. When I, completely unconcerned, prompt him to continue, a triumphant, predatory smile spreads across his face.

“I immediately refused. I told them that since this isn’t paper made from animal skin, the parchment makers’ association has nothing to do with it, and that they should get out of my face.”

The blood drains from my face when I see how excessively belligerent Benno’s being. If he could find some sort of compromise, then he wouldn’t have to fight with them over sales at all, would he?

“Huh? Ummm, so you didn’t try to compromise or negotiate, then?”

“Idiot. If I start acting all modest from the beginning, they’re not going to take me seriously, you know? The reality of it is that we’re not stealing any of their manufacturing methods, so they can’t charge us any sort of technical fee. There’s no way you can make plant-based paper using a process designed for making paper out of animal skin, so there’s no real hierarchy here. What these guys really want to do is have a monopoly on everything paper-related at all and, if they can, steal our profits for themselves.”

It looks like I’ve got my way of doing things and Benno’s got his, so even if I try to object it looks like nothing will come of it, but I wonder if there’s a way we could handle things a bit more peaceably?

“Ummm, I think that since parchment’s made of paper, they won’t be able to suddenly increase their production. If the guild’s going to be intermediating, then perhaps they could restrict the kind of paper they could use for official contracts to parchment only? If you’d agree to that, then they’d still mostly keep their existing market and their existing products; how about that?”

“You’re as soft as ever, kid.”

Benno snorts derisively. I wonder if he thinks that guaranteeing them their existing clientele and profits by letting all official contracts be written on parchment would just be quietly rolling over? I wonder if this might just not work.

“I just don’t like doing pointless things,” I say. “Besides, what I really want is to increase the circulation of paper so that lots of people can do new things with it. I want to see books, notepads, paintings, paper art... I

want it to be something that people will even let kids use.”

“That’s... a much grander dream than I expected,” he murmurs, his eyes open with amazement. “Huh? You think it’s grand? I’ve been thinking that if we could just make a lot of paper, then we could make it happen. That’s why I think that if we want to be bold and sell folin paper at a way lower price than parchment, then as long as people are using it for things besides writing contracts, then it should be fine, shouldn’t it? For instance, look at that report. If that was written on paper, then it would be easier to carry, and easier to store, too. And it’s way easier to write on than boards...” “I see, you want to differentiate the use of different kinds of paper, huh... I’ll try proposing that.”

This time he doesn’t tell me that I’m being soft, but instead gives me a scheming sort of smile. It seems like I might have actually tickled the profit-seeking center of his brain.

“If we’re differentiating between kinds of paper,” I continue, “then how about we treat tronbay paper as a high-grade good? To be honest, I think it’s a much higher-quality product than parchment.”

“You’re right. I’ve already been planning on selling it at a much higher price than parchment.” “Huh? Much higher?”

I look at him with wide eyes, wondering if he might have misspoken. Benno, on the other hand, narrows his eyes, looking back and forth between me and Lutz, scrutinizing us.

“...Did the two of you just not notice?”

“Huh? Notice... what?” “Lutz, what are the special properties of tronbay?”

Lutz jumps, startled by the sudden question, then starts listing off the various characteristics of tronbay as they come to mind.

“Huh? Properties? Well, it sucks up all of the nutrients from the surrounding soil, it grows really quickly, it’s hard to burn—”

“Ah!” I interject, “is that it! ...Is paper made from tronbay hard to burn?”

Come to think of it, my father said that furniture made from tronbay is fire resistant, to the point where it's often left standing after a big fire. The young, soft wood isn't useful for making furniture, he said, so we made paper out of it.

"Yeah, that's right. Compared to ordinary paper, it's extremely hard to burn. Of course, it isn't completely impossible to burn it, but it's still an excellent paper for writing national secrets or national public records. Something like a hard-to-burn paper will sell for a very high price indeed."

That's certainly a special kind of paper, so of course it would sell for a high price. Even in Japan, it's not like all kinds of paper cost the same. If it took a lot of labor to make, if it's made out of something rare, or if it's otherwise somehow special, then a single sheet could sell for an astonishingly high price indeed.

"I understand," I say. "...Then, how much would a sheet of tronbay paper sell for?"

"For a contract-sized sheet, I'll be selling them for five large silver coins each." "Whoa..."

The enormously huge price he's assigned to it gives me a sudden headache, while Lutz is so shocked that he can't even say anything, but Benno merely says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world, that "it's a fire-resistant paper made from a hard-to-find material, that's why."

"So, then," he says, "until negotiations with the parchment makers' association have finished, don't show your face around the shop for a while. I've got a good reason for why I don't want you two to be seen. Specifically, if your paper-making method were to leak and start spreading around, we're going to start seeing corpses."

"Uh."

I stand there, blinking, shocked by how quickly the conversation turned grim. Benno then starts reminding me of some things about the contract magic that I'd completely forgotten about.

"According to our magical contract, the individual who decides who can

manufacture paper is you, Maïne, and the individual who determines who can sell it is you, Lutz. If someone who doesn't know anything about this contract tries making or selling paper on their own, I have no idea what might wind up happening."

"Whaaat?! Contract magic is that dangerous?! It even affects people who don't know anything about it?"

This completely unforeseen development has me reeling. I hadn't even considered that the magical contract that guaranteed us safe employment would have such an incredibly dangerous function to it.

"It's meant to guarantee the rights of people who deal with the nobility, right? Even if the person who violates it has no knowledge about the contract at all, some kind of punishment will still be handed down. That's why I want to keep your existences a secret, declare to the merchant's guild that I have a magical contract saying that my shop makes and sells the paper, and thus keep the parchment makers' association in check."

Perhaps I shouldn't be calling this magical contract something that secures our employment, but something that puts us in incredible danger. It declares that I hold the sole right to determine who is able to make plant-based paper and Lutz holds the sole right to sell it, and that, in reality, puts us in a really dangerous situation, doesn't it?

"I'd like to keep it a secret that you two are the ones who control who can sell it. I'll leave the key to the storehouse with you, so don't come around here for a while. When I'm done with my negotiations, I'll contact you through Otto."

Chapter 61: Result of the Meetings with the Vested Interests

Thanks to the magical contract I signed, wishing for a stable future, people might start dying.

Benno's words have me terrified. There's no way I would have wanted to put other people in harms way just so that Lutz and I could secure our future employment. Trembling and shivering, I walk home with Lutz. There's a pit in my stomach, like I'd swallowed a chunk of lead, and it churns within me.

"You don't have to worry so much," says Lutz. "It'll be okay. Master Benno's taking care of it."

I nod at Lutz as he tries to reassure me, but after I get home, I start thinking about how people I might not know might start dying and how we might face some kind of punishment, and all I can do is worry and worry. My stomach ties itself in a knot.

If you were to ask me what's so scary, it's dragging completely unknowing outsiders into this.

What I really want to do is lock myself in my house, but Lutz practically drags me out of the house, telling me that staring blankly at the wall made me look like I was thinking some strange thoughts. We keep working on making paper and keep going to the forest, but apart from that the only thing we can do is wait to hear back from Benno. However, even after a few days, no matter how many times we've passed through the gates on our way to and from the forest, we haven't heard a single thing from Otto. I haven't heard anyone talking about any mysterious deaths, either. Everything seems to be basically the same as it always has been.

As even more time passes, my fear starts to be replaced by suspicion. Would people really start turning up dead? Couldn't Benno have just been exaggerating? Thinking along those lines, I try to recall exactly what he said, and what his facial expression and attitude had been like.

“...If you think about it, it’s kinda weird, right?” I say. “What is?” replies Lutz, furrowing his eyebrows. He peels a fresh, wet sheet of paper off of the bamboo mat and spreads it out on the paper bed. “The fact that contract magic can affect people who don’t know about it,” I remind him. “Why?” he replies, in a casual tone of voice. “It’s magic, isn’t it supposed to be mysterious?” He finishes laying down his sheet of paper, and I start working on mine. “I think it’s kinda weird that magic is supposed to be mysterious. Or, rather, what if someone writes contract magic about some basic technique or some widespread commodity? Wouldn’t there be fallout from that everywhere? And if it was used in a faraway city, then there’s no way we’d ever hear about it in this city, too...”

“Huh, I guess you’re right.”

I continue thinking about it as I spread pulp over my paper mat. If contract magic were used as some kind of patent enforcement system, then that means there would need to be some kind of patent office controlling it. It would be dangerous to the public if nobody knew whether or not a particular product was protected by contract magic.

“And, because we don’t know about it, I’m thinking that there have to be limits to the range or the effects of contract magic. Besides, wouldn’t there be much stricter protection in place around the use of such a dangerous kind of magic?”

“You’re kind of talking in circles around it, but, really, you’re anxious, aren’t you?” “Anxious...”

I unintentionally freeze up when he says that. Lutz, sitting next to me, takes the bamboo mat from me and keeps working.

“When you’re trying to hide what you’re really feeling from yourself, you always start talking a lot,” he says. He lifts his chin a tiny bit, then urges me on, saying, “if you keep it all down I won’t understand any of it, so just spit it all out already.”

“...I’m scared that people who don’t know about our magic contract might get put into danger. I want to think that Mister Benno was joking or even lying to us. Like, nobody’s in danger right now, right? He just wanted

to scare us, right? ...That's what I want to be thinking."

"Well, if he is joking, what's the point? What does he get out of deceiving us?" "Urgh... I, I mean, before now he's deceived us a lot. I'm thinking that maybe he's trying to cheat us, or maybe he's keeping secrets, or maybe this is some kind of test."

As I wonder aloud why Benno could be trying to keep us away, I suddenly hear a very familiar voice come from behind me.

"Hm? You mean to tell me you don't trust Benno, Maïne?"

Having thought that there was nobody else in the workshop but the two of us, Lutz and I instantly snap our heads around to see who we had just heard.

"Mister Otto?!"

"Why're you here?!"

Otto waves at us, eyebrows raised in an expression of mild surprise. He's dressed in civilian clothes.

"I'm here to deliver a message from Benno, remember?"

"A message?!"

Certainly, Benno had said that he'd contact us through Otto, but I'd thought that would have involved flagging us down when we passed through the gates. I certainly didn't think he'd just show up at our storehouse like this.

"It's finally done, he said."

Such a simple message doesn't tell me anything. I, who suffered through a constantly churning stomach as the result of a lack of information, immediately jump on him, pressing for details.

"What's finally done? How'd it get done?!"

"It seems there were some difficulties with it." "Some difficulties? What happened?!"

Otto merely shrugs, refusing to give any sort of answer that actually

answered anything. I have no idea if he actually doesn't know what's happening or if he's merely pretending not to.

"Benno didn't explain anything to you?" he asks. "He didn't tell me much. I know that if people who don't know about our magic contract make or sell paper on their own then something bad will happen, and that he doesn't want us to come around the shop until he's done with his negotiations with the parchment makers' association, since he wants to keep our manufacturing methods hidden. That's all."

As I explain what little Benno had told me, Otto gently strokes his chin.

"Hmm, so he's told you the barest minimum amount for now, hasn't he?"

"Our contract hasn't done any damage to any unknown people, has it? That's the thing I'm most worried about..." "He kept your manufacturing methods hidden so that wouldn't happen, didn't he? There really hasn't been any damage. Anything more than that you should probably ask Benno about. When you get to a good stopping point, how about we go there together?" "Okay!"

Hearing that nobody's been hurt takes an enormous weight off my chest. With my body suddenly feeling much lighter, I diligently go back to spreading pulp over the paper frame.

"Ah, so is this how you make paper? What's this thing here?"

"A trade secret." "This syrupy sort of goo, what's it made of?" "Trade secrets."

Even though Otto seems very interested in how paper actually gets made, I refuse to answer any of his many questions as I continue my work.

"We've got a great working relationship, Maïne. It's alright to tell me about this stuff, isn't it?"

"Mister Benno will get mad at me if I start carelessly telling you everything. Right, Lutz?"

I pass the conversation on to Lutz, who smiles, shrugging.

“Right, because you never think, you always just start talking. You should probably keep your mouth shut.”

“Ahaha...,” chuckles Otto. “Talking without thinking? I can imagine how thick the vein popping out of his forehead gets when that happens.” “Oh, his veins don’t pop out that often. He usually just gets really, really shocked.”

After we tidy up our tools, the three of us head towards Benno’s shop. As we walk through the alleys, Otto, faster than we are, pulls ahead. He stops, then looks down at me, rubbing his temples.

“...Do you usually walk this slowly?”

“...Yes...?” “Whoa, you’re amazing, Lutz. You’re way more patient than I am. I respect that! ...Anyhow, pardon me.” “Whoa!”

Otto, confessing his own impatience, abruptly picks me up, then starts walking briskly forward. Now that I think about it, recently, both Benno and Mark have insisted on carrying me every time. It seems that, somehow, my walking speed is so slow that adults can’t help but feel like they absolutely have to carry me around. This is kind of a shock.

When we arrive at Benno’s shop, Mark comes out to greet us.

“Maïne, Lutz, good afternoon. Master Otto, you have my deepest gratitude for everything you have done for us.” He bows to Otto. “It wasn’t a big deal,” replies Otto, offhandedly. “It was actually pretty fun! Is Benno in?”

He immediately heads inside. Still holding me in one hand, he uses his other hand to push open the door to the back room.

“Benno, the water goddess has arrived!”

The instant Otto enters, saying something strange, Benno immediately shoots him a glare, a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. The sheer intensity of Benno’s glare is such that I, still carried in Otto’s arms, am hit by the shockwave.

“Shut up, Otto. You don’t want Corinna to divorce you, do you?”

It seems that Benno, as Corinna's substitute father, might have the authority to force the two of them to get a divorce. Otto's basically his son-in-law, then, so it seems Benno's something like the head of the family.

I'm not the only one who puts Benno's sharp glare and his low growl together and realizes how serious he really is. Otto, who's built his entire life revolving around Corinna, frantically starts apologizing.

"Whoa! No way! That was a little joke, you know?!"

"It's not a joke if it's not actually funny."

Benno, wearing an expression such that I can't quite tell if he's joking or serious, starts reaching out as if to crush Otto's skull. I, suddenly scared of being dropped, would like this to stop.

"Mister Benno, what seems to have you in such a bad mood?"

"It's this asshole's fault."

Although Benno scowls at him, Otto doesn't seem to act like he cares that much as he sets me down on the floor.

"Benno," he says, "looks like Maïne doesn't trust you! I caught her grumbling about you a little while ago. She was worried you might be deceiving her, keeping secrets from her, or even testing her, she said."

I'm pretty sure he knows exactly how angry Benno is. He's absolutely saying something unnecessary right now. I have no doubt that he's saying these things because Benno's mad.

"Mister Otto," I object, "don't say that!"

I'm positive that Otto's words will only make Benno's mood worse, so I worriedly look over to see how Benno's reacting. However, instead of seeming any angrier, Benno just looks down at me, then lets out an exhausted sigh.

"Haahhh... are you getting too perceptive? Or maybe just too doubtful? Or maybe you just have a bad personality? I've been doing all of this hard, pain-in-the-ass work for you, and all I needed you to do was to just stay

away and be quiet, and still...”

“But,” interjects Otto, “not just blindly swallowing whatever someone tells you is a very important skill for a merchant to have, so trying to figure out the real meaning behind their words and actions is the right thing to do!”

He gives me a big grin and a thumbs-up.

“Well, whatever,” says Benno. “I’ll answer your questions. Sit.”

We sit down at our usual table, facing each other and, with the very first words out of my mouth, I ask Benno about the thing that I’m most worried about.

“Can contract magic really affect uninvolved people?”

“Based on what’s written in it, yeah, it’s happened before. This time, if we’re not careful, it could happen again. I explained this to you already, right?”

Certainly, he had said that. He’d explained it, but I just hadn’t accepted it.

“But, if it were used for some basic craft, or some product or technique that’s already widespread, wouldn’t there be all sorts of damage everywhere? If someone were to write a magic contract in some far-off country, then we’d have no way of knowing about it at all... there’s got to be some sort of limit on its effects, or a maximum range, isn’t there? Also, shouldn’t there be some sort of control on the use of magic contracts, or something like that...”

Benno nods, looking slightly amazed as I lay out my thoughts.

“Yeah, magic contracts only really work in the city they were signed in. Small-scale magics that happen inside the city can’t make it out of the magical barrier built into the walls around it.”

“Magical barrier?! Whoa, what’s that?!”

The mention of a previously-unheard fantasy setting term sets my heart alight, and I instinctively lean forward and start asking for more

information, but all I earn is another glare from Benno.

“It’s the foundation of a town, but that doesn’t matter right now. So, are we all done with questions and explanations for today?”

“Ahh, no, wait! So if contract magic can affect people who don’t know about it, then that’s really dangerous, isn’t it? It’s weird to just be able to casually use it for whatever, isn’t it?”

Benno raises one eyebrow, looking a little uncomfortable, and stares at me.

“No, you can’t just ‘casually use it for whatever’. The magical tools you need for it are given only to specifically approved merchants, and they’re so expensive your eyes would pop out of your head if I told you. And also, like you thought, contracts that can affect people besides the signatories absolutely must be declared to the lord of the land. If any damage were to happen without us declaring it, then we’d be the ones who get punished.”

“Huh? Then...”

The instant I start to panic about forgetting to declare the contract and damage happening, Benno flicks my forehead.

“Gyah!”

“Don’t misunderstand. I told the lord of the land about this a long time ago.”

He guessed what I was going to say before I could even open my mouth. As I groan, rubbing my forehead, Benno snorts, the corners of his mouth turning up in a triumphant grin.

“And, when I declared the contract, I was told that I needed to inform the merchant’s guild that I had signed a magical contract relating to a new commodity, and register it with them.”

“...So in other words, you declared it to the guild as well?” “Of course I went! I declared it and registered it. Then, I went to get approval to start a new trade association.” “What?”

Start a new trade association? What does he plan to do? Isn’t he doing

something incredibly over-the-top?

Hearing those unexpected words, my eyes widen in surprise and I tilt my head to one side. Seeing this, Benno puffs up his chest, looking extremely self-satisfied.

“Plant-based paper is something that could turn into an enormous enterprise, right? So, I went to start a papermakers’ association, like the parchment makers’ association, so I can spread my business wide, even to other cities.”

“...This is news to me, though?”

Stunned, my face freezes. Benno nods emphatically.

“It’s the first time I’m telling you.”

“W... wait a minute. So that means, you were planning on competing with the parchment makers right from the beginning weren’t you?! You never wanted to have a peaceful talk with them at all!”

Why he’d race straight towards such a stubborn conclusion, I have no idea. I can’t see any room for laying any groundwork, making concessions, or finding any points of compromise anywhere in there.

“It’s not my fault that it didn’t end nice and quietly. It’s that old bastard’s fault.”

“Are you just shifting the blame?” I reply.

As Benno glares at me, growling, Otto, sitting next to him, starts laughing uproariously, clutching his sides. I have no idea just how that got set off, but Benno and I just glance at him, mutually deciding to leave him alone.

“I’m not shifting the blame. I went to the merchant’s guild to get everything declared, but because I didn’t have any of the actual product on hand when the contract was signed, I was told that I couldn’t actually register it. So, when the prototype was finished, I went again to go register it.”

“Ah...” “But, the guild master decided he didn’t like the idea of me

registering a new trade association, so he gave me this long-winded speech, and then even though I got my application in, it seems like it's still not done being processed, even though the seasons have already changed entirely."

Come to think of it, back when Lutz and I went to get our temporary registrations, the guild master interfered with that too. He eventually allowed us to be registered, since he wanted to be able to do business with me for a hairpin, but I remember him being extremely reluctant about that.

"That happened before, when Lutz and I needed temporary registrations, but could the guild master hold back your registration or reject it for totally personal reasons?"

"If he could come up with some plausible pretext for it. Remember, when we got you registered, his reason was that you weren't my blood relatives, right? This time, he said he felt like the parchment makers' association already was a paper organization, so there wasn't a need to make another association solely for plant-based paper."

Judging by the deeply unpleasant expression on Benno's face, he must be reliving the mood he'd been in during his meeting with the guild master. I feel like it must have been a dangerous struggle, with the guild master constantly finding fault with him.

"I can imagine how that discussion went," I say. "I'd filed my application back in the autumn, so I started selling paper now thinking that there's no way I still wouldn't actually be registered. It's obvious that I wasn't cautious enough, but do you really think I'm shifting the blame here?"

He glares at me, and I frantically shake my head.

"Ummm, no, I think it's the guild master's fault for procrastinating."

"That's right. So, when I sold paper without that registration, then the parchment makers' guild went to lodge a complaint. But that old bastard played it totally innocent, and then he even started by siding entirely with the other guys..."

It's looking more and more like Benno's rival isn't actually the parchment makers' association. It's the guild master.

"So, the magic contract still isn't done being registered, even though the lord of the land himself told me to go do it. If something bad were to happen to some unknown person because of that, then what do you think would happen?"

Failing to register after being explicitly told to would either leave an extremely bad impression or be treated as an outright felony, I think.

"I think the lord of the land would get very angry," I say. "Yeah. He'd confiscate my tools for making magical contracts, and then, he'd restrict all of my dealings with the nobility, and then he'd punish all of the signatories. If that happens, I think that would probably be that old bastard's best possible outcome! So, until registration finished, there was no way we could let anyone know about how your papermaking methodology worked."

"Ah, I see..."

Now that I know how vigilant Benno's trying to be against the guild master, I can understand how strict he was being.

"However, there's no way I could get the two of you tangled up in the enormous pain in the ass that is a negotiation between adults, right? Especially you, Maïne, since you don't pay any attention to your actual surroundings, and then just because some acquaintance saves your life, you just start carelessly blathering on about all sorts of sensitive information."

"Whaaat?! You trust me that little?!" "There's an abundance of evidence. Reflect on your own actions a little." "Ngh..."

Reminded of the various things I'd wound up doing at the guild master's house, I can't come up with any retort. Certainly, from Benno's standpoint, he has no idea what I might wind up doing, so keeping me isolated is the best course of action.

"I think I understand the gist of it," I say. "So, were the negotiations with

the parchment makers' association very difficult?"

"That was all just making the necessary arrangements, so that wasn't particularly difficult. No, the only bothersome part of that was dealing with that old bastard."

The guild master really is the last boss, huh? I never thought that Benno would be treating the parchment makers as trash mobs. This is a development I hadn't even considered, back when I was making paper with a huge knot in my stomach.

Otto, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, grins broadly, then opens his mouth to speak.

"I was taken along to that meeting. We worked out an agreement on a compromise plan."

"Compromise plan?" "The one where we'd distinguish kinds of paper based on usage," says Benno. "Ahh..."

Benno's words reminds me of the fact that I'd suggested it to begin with, and I clap my hands. With that compromise, we'd be able to distribute paper far and wide while preserving, for now, the parchment makers' market territory. This is a big step forward for my book-making project, isn't it? As paper becomes more widespread, the price will drop, and just through that alone books will become way easier to make.

It looks like I finally don't have to worry about paper anymore when it comes to making books.

Once Benno establishes a workshop for mass production, all my paper-related worries will disappear. My next issue will be finding ink, and then printing... and as my thoughts take off into the clouds, even Otto looks like he's somehow enjoying himself.

"And now everyone's shocked! Who's this guy, and what did he do with that totally uncompromising Benno we know?! So now there's this rumor going around that the water goddess came to visit him."

"The water goddess?" asks Lutz, speaking up now that the conversation has digressed from the troublesome tales of the meeting and the mood of

the room has softened somewhat. “The springtime herald of the melting snow,” explains Otto. “The goddess who brings an end to the long winter.”

Otto’s words snap me back to my senses. Now that I think about it, I really don’t know any of the mythology of this world at all. I already found one mention of a god in the new year’s greeting, so it’s likely that there’s more of them hiding around in day-to-day life around here.

“...This water goddess, is she different from the goddess of spring that we talk about in the new year’s greeting?”

“Different, hmm... well, the goddess of melted snow, the goddess of new buds, and all of the other spring-related goddesses are all called goddesses of spring, you know?” “Huh...”

Is it just me, or does calling it “polytheism” make it sound a little more relatable? At least, this doesn’t look like a world where I’d be forced into the same kind of monotheism that I was kind of coerced into in my Urano days. I’m feeling a little less anxious about my baptism, now.

“...That’s it?” says Otto, looking blankly at me. It seems that, after he took the effort to explain all of that to me, responding with a single “huh...” might have been a little rude. “Hm? Oh, umm... I’m happy to know a little more about the goddesses now. I’ll be sure to ask you more about the gods next time!”

“Oh, that’s not what I meant, O wa—” “Otto, do you want to be kicked out?” growls Benno, giving him an extremely irritated look.

I have a feeling that my incorrect guess might have somehow been the cause, but I can’t really tell how just from seeing Benno’s angry expression, and I’m still pretty sure I was correct.

“Mister Benno, now that I think about it, why did you bring Mister Otto to the meeting?”

I toss Otto a lifeline in order to stop Benno from talking about how he was going to kick him out of the family, and it seems like I successfully manage to shift Benno’s attention to me. He quickly lets go of Otto and turns to me. Otto gives me an extremely thankful look.

“When the paper makers’ association gets off of the ground, I plan to have him help me with it.”

“Oh? Wait, then, you mean Mister Otto will get to be a merchant?!”

Has the day come where Otto, who had abandoned the life of a merchant so that he could marry Corinna, could finally become one again? As I think that happy thought, though, Benno shakes his head at me.

“No, Otto’ll be a soldier til the bitter end. I’m just using him in his free time.”

“Whaaaat?! That’s really mean, isn’t it?!”

To have to work all day as a soldier, and then be used by Benno as a merchant when his soldier’s work is done, that really is a pitiable state to be in. Lutz, sitting next to me, nods in agreement. However, Benno just snorts, then looks at Otto with a cruel grin.

“Oh, it’s only natural that he work to pay me his share of the rent. For Corinna’s sake. Right, Otto?”

“I think I’d be earning a little more than just rent money, though?”

The two of them stare at each other with dark smiles, now completely ignoring me and Lutz. I have no idea how long it’ll take for them to be finished with this staring contest, so I tap lightly on the table.

“Mister Benno, I’ve got a follow-up question. What eventually happened with the guild master?”

Benno turns his gaze away from Otto and focuses on me. He shrugs his shoulders, then grins triumphantly.

“Since we found some common ground, the parchment makers’ association agreed to the creation of a paper makers’ association, so the guild leader reluctantly approved of it too.”

“He was forced to approve of it, you mean?” interjects Otto.

Otto’s phrasing is probably a little more accurate, I think. Lutz and I nod in understanding. Seeing this, Benno clucks his tongue at us.

“I’ve filled out every necessary form exactly, I’ve negotiated everything with the parchment makers’ association, and I’ve done so with nobody getting injured. The fact that everything’s being dragged out so long, even with all that, is entirely because the guild master is dragging his feet.”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” says Otto. “But, maybe, you might not have needed to say things like ‘if you’re so senile that you can’t read paperwork anymore then you should just retire already’ or ‘how about you just let me do it if you are so damned inclined’? Just a thought.”

I squeak as my breath catches in my throat.

“It’s because you say things like that!” I say. “If you’re being that... brazen, then of course things are going to get difficult! You made the guild master mad, didn’t you?”

“Oh, his face was bright red, he was so mad.” says Otto. “I didn’t think a person’s face could even get that red!”

Otto is talking like this is somehow kinda funny, but this is absolutely not a laughing matter. Benno adds, “that was a sight to see,” and Otto nods emphatically.

“I don’t care how much I piss off that old bastard. This time, thanks to all of his pestering, not pissing him off would have been even harder.”

It seems like the gulf between Benno and the guild master has grown even wider and deeper thanks to these events.

“Anyhow, this time for sure I’ve confirmed that our registration is complete. Now, it’s time to put everything into making and selling some paper. First off, I’ve got to decide on a workshop in the city.”

Now that the complicated problems have been solved, Benno starts talking about how he’d like to decide on a workshop for putting paper into production.

“I’d like to get mass production going at a workshop shortly after this summer’s baptismal ceremonies are complete.”

“Why?” asks Otto, tilting his head curiously. “After doing a lot of profit

calculations, I've come to the conclusion that it's best to get started after Lutz is baptized and starts his apprenticeship here. At that point, I don't need to pay these two anymore. Plus, by the time I find a workshop, have the equipment made, procure the raw materials, and have the staff learn the manufacturing technique, it'll be around that time anyway." "Hm, you're right," I say.

It had been hard for Lutz and I to secure our own tools as well. It's only natural that getting however many large-scale tools he'd need for mass production would be incredibly difficult.

"In any event, Maïne, Lutz. I'll be consulting with you on picking out a workshop, and you'll tell me everything you know about the manufacturing process."

Chapter 62: Workshop Selection and Tools

“Tell me everything you know about paper-making, so that I can figure out where and how large the workshop will be,” says Benno, looking very self-important. Wouldn’t it be appropriate, though, for me to ask for a fee for this information, like I did for the rinsham?

Watching him carefully, I open my mouth. “Lutz and I aren’t going to make any money off of this paper makers’ association of yours, so we’re going to have to charge you for any information about actually making paper, you know?”

“...Ah well, can’t be helped. How much?”

Benno smiles, smugly, tapping the table with his finger. How much should I actually charge, though? I have no idea whatsoever what a fair price would be in this case.

“Ummm, how much are you willing to pay?”

“Whatever you ask for. How much?”

He turns the question back around on me, his smile widening, perhaps having guessed my thought process. The only reference point I have for information fees is the rinsham, which was three small gold coins. Since Benno’s going as far as to make a new trade association for vegetable-based paper, he must be thinking that he’ll be able to do great things with this.

“Nnngh... H... how about tw... twice the fee from the rinsham?”

“Alright, deal. Here.”

Benno pulls out his guild card and waves it around in front of me. I take mine out and clink it against his. He just calmly accepted my offer without even the slightest flicker in his broad smile. Should I have charged him way more? I really don’t have any idea how to estimate these things at all.

As I ponder, grumbling, Otto folds his arms, looking at Benno.

“For the workshop, let’s listen to what Maïne has to say, then start thinking about the size and amount of equipment we’ll need, and the scale and location of the workshop itself. For now, we can probably just appropriate the tools that we already have at the storehouse, right?”

Otto’s words cause my eyes to bug out.

“Those are the property of Maïne’s Workshop!” I say. “If you take them, then won’t Lutz and I basically not be able to make paper anymore?”

“...The storehouse itself is Master Benno’s, though,” adds Lutz.

I glare at Lutz, lips pursed, when he interjects, then look over at Benno. If they start doing things like appropriating our tools, then we’d be in a lot of trouble. Plus, those tools aren’t at all suited for mass production.

“Also,” I add, “that really won’t work. The tools we have at Maïne’s Workshop can’t really be used for mass production.”

“Hm?”

Benno raises his eyebrows, not following my train of thought. I start to explain.

“Our tools were made primarily for the sake of finishing our prototype, so we made them easy for us to use. They’re lightweight, miniaturized, and simplified, so they’re not really suited for mass production. Also, I was concerned about spending too much of your money, sir, so I made several substitutions using things at hand...”

“Huh?” says Otto. “Why would you be concerned about that when he said he’d give you money? It would have been better to put together the best equipment you could...”

Otto looks at me like I’m an idiot, but I really hadn’t been thinking about trying to put together the best possible equipment at all. Back then, getting even a single nail was extremely difficult for me, so the only thing I was thinking about was how I could make things as cheaply as possible.

“I wouldn’t have done something so shameless,” I reply. “I think that I might get a little more bold in the future, though.”

“I really don’t care if you get more bold,” says Benno. “So, when you say these aren’t suited for mass production, what do you mean by that?”
“There’s a difference in physique.”

I think about how to phrase things in a way that’s easiest for Benno to understand.

“For example, the paper frame that the two of us have been using is the size of a written contract, but an adult man could probably use a much bigger paper frame for making paper. If you could use a frame that’s large enough to make four sheets at a time, then you’d save a lot of time.”

“Ah, I see.”

Even if you scale up the operation, if you still make relatively small contract-sized sheets one by one, all you’ll do is increase the amount of time and manpower you’re using. If you’re strong enough to use a larger paper frame, then making several sheets at once is a better idea.

“And also, since we wanted something we could actually handle, we’re using a large tub to make pulp, but if you’re going to use a larger paper frame, then you’d need a larger vat to make all the pulp you’d need, wouldn’t you? And right now, I’m using cooking chopsticks to mix the pulp instead of the rake you’d usually use...”

“I’m not familiar with any of these tools,” says Benno, tapping his temple thoughtfully and looking down at me. Most of these tools are things that we didn’t order through him. “Hmmm, I think that it might be hard to understand what kind of tools you’d need and what we’ve been substituting if we don’t show you our actual process down at the storehouse while we explain it.” “Oh? Well then, I’ll stop by your storehouse tomorrow to observe you. I haven’t actually seen your workshop before, so this is a perfect chance.”

I’m startled by how smoothly he suddenly decides tomorrow’s course of action. I try to recall what plans we’d already had for making paper.

“Even if you say you want to come by to observe us, we unfortunately just finished our current round of paper today. So, tomorrow all that we’ll be doing is letting it dry, so we don’t particularly have anything to do with

that particular batch, so we were thinking that we'd go to the forest tomorrow to gather raw materials..."

"Hoh, so you're saying that you're starting a brand new batch?" "That's right. We'll be cutting wood, steaming it, and stripping off the bark. We'll then bring it back to the warehouse to let it dry, and that's about it."

As I talk, Benno nods along.

"Alright," he says, "Mark will go with you."

"Huh? To the forest?"

When he says that, I try to picture Mark coming to the forest with us. It just doesn't work. I refuse.

"Mister Mark is a wonderfully proper gentleman who always dresses impeccably. He's not at all suited for things like cutting wood or stripping bark. ...Hmm, but, Mister Benno, you'd be alright wearing work clothes, right?"

"Hey, what do you mean by that?!" "What I'm saying is that you're the one who wants to learn more about the work, sir, so I think it would be best for you to go." "That's not what you just said."

Even though he has a pretty disagreeable expression on, Benno agrees that he does want to understand the process from beginning to end, so he decides to accompany us after all. Before we know it, we've made plans to head off to the forest to work tomorrow.

The next day, when Lutz went to retrieve the key to the warehouse, it seems that he apparently found Benno, already wearing work clothes. Mark, who came out to greet Lutz, had a troubled expression on his face, constantly worried that Benno might be running wild. Lutz quietly whispers all of this to me shortly after he returns.

"I'm impressed you can work in such a tiny space," says Benno.

He slowly spins around inside the storehouse, taking it all in. To Benno, who usually works in such a large shop, it's only natural that a storehouse only big enough for two children to loiter in would seem very cramped.

“It’s fine for when it’s just me and Lutz, but when you’re here as well it is pretty small. Well, most of our work takes place outside, so there’s not a lot that we actually do in here, you know.”

We start gathering up the tools we usually take with us when we head to the forest to gather materials. Into the pot, we put the steamer, the bucket, and a bit of firewood. Today, all I’m carrying in the basket strapped to my back is my pair of chopsticks, the plank I use in place of a plate, some kalfe root, and some butter. Benno offers to carry part of Lutz’s load, but Lutz just slowly shakes his head.

“It’s okay, I’m used to it by now... uh, sir. Instead of helping with my stuff, it would really help if you could carry Maïne.”

“You always carry all of this, kid?” Benno replies, frowning. “That must be rough, isn’t it?”

He snorts, then abruptly picks me up, backpack and all, carrying me piggyback.

“Wha?!”

“Hold on tight. Lutz, give me that big wooden frame, at least. I can’t stand how it looks like it might get smashed.”

Benno takes the steamer in one hand, then starts walking. His strides are enormous, and he sways back and forth a lot as he walks. Terrified, I cling tightly to his head.

“Ummm, so we picked the size of our pot based on what Lutz is able to carry, but since the pot is fairly small that means that the amount of wood we can steam at once has to be small as well. You should probably consider whether you want to use one big pot or a few smaller pots, I think? If you find a workshop near the river, then you won’t have to carry the pots to the river, just the materials, so it’ll be much easier.”

“Mhmm...”

Since today we’re going with Benno, an adult, we don’t need to be with the rest of the unbaptized children today. We skip the usual meeting point entirely and head straight from the storehouse to the southern gates.

When we arrive, I see my father and Otto talking about something.

“Daddy, Mister Otto. We’re heading out!”

I give the two of them a big wave over Benno’s shoulder. Their eyes widen a bit, and they hurry over to us.

“Maïne, who’s this?” says my father. “This is Mister Benno, the merchant that I’ve been working with. Mister Benno, this is my father.”

While the two of them exchange their greetings, I notice out of the corner of my eye that Otto is shaking a little bit.

“Mister Otto, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, I mean, looking at you two together, Benno’s looking a little bit fatherly...” “Shut up, Otto. I’m a bachelor.”

Benno angrily smacks Otto upside the head, then starts walking with long, swaying strides.

Huh, Benno’s a bachelor, he says? He’s at a great age, though.

Since the marriage age is pretty low around here, my father is barely in his thirties. It feels a little strange for Benno, who looks to be roughly the same age as my father, to be unmarried.

“Mister Benno, you’re not going to get married?” I asked. “...Yeah, probably not.”

“Would it be okay for me to ask why? This is purely out of curiosity, so if you don’t want to say then I can forget all about it.” Benno smiles wryly. “It’s not like it’s a big secret,” he says. “When I wanted to get married, I had my hands full taking care of my family. After Corinna got married, I didn’t have anyone left that I still had to take care of, but then the woman I wanted to marry died. There wasn’t anyone else but her, so I never got married. That’s it.”

“That’s it,” he says, even though it’s such a heavy story.

I let out a slow sigh. The reason he’s single is because a very important person to him died. I can’t really pester him for more details, nor can I poke fun at his bachelorhood. I pat his head gently, and he smiles wryly.

“What’s this, now?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought that you were going to say that you’re single because you’re in charge of such a large shop and things like marriage and succession and all of that would make your life obnoxious.” “Well, you’re not wrong. But, it’s been pretty quiet lately. I’ll be training Corinna’s kids to by my successors so there’s no problem there. That was one of the conditions I gave for those two to get married, after all.”

Whoa. Hang in there, Mister Otto.

As I quietly cheer him on in my heart, we reach the end of the dark tunnel and emerge into the world beyond, where the stone-paved road is replaced with dirt and the air is much, much fresher. The broad field of view leaves me with a great sense of freedom.

“Ahhh, it’s been a while since I’ve gone to the forest,” says Benno. “Now that you mention it, you did say a while ago that you’d gone picking paru. I thought that merchants’ children didn’t really go to the forest, though. Freida even said that she’d never been except for picnics...”

I can’t forget the shock I’d felt when Freida said that it sounded like I went on picnics every day. Benno chuckles, then gets a nostalgic look in his eyes.

“I’d occasionally slip out of my house to go in secret,” he says. “In secret...”

“The other apprentices around my age that were working in my family’s shop would go there to forage, you know? So it’s only natural that I’d get curious, right? Kids still do that, right?” “...Aaaah, yeah,” says Lutz, “now that you mention it, every now and then when some of the apprentice kids come with us I see some people I don’t really know.”

After their baptisms, apprentices still go to the forest on their days off to forage or hunt. Unlike us pre-baptismal children, they can go to and from the forest freely, so there’s lots of them that just go whenever they want. However, sometimes they have friends who aren’t apprentices yet, so they occasionally meet up with other kids at the usual meeting stop and go with the group. It seems like even Benno went with other kids like that.

“So, how do the children of merchants generally spend their time?” I ask. “I spent most of my time studying. I studied how to receive customers that come to the shop. When I went to the town market, I had to do calculations on the prices I saw, learn how to identify outsiders, how to tell when goods were good or bad, and so on...”

No matter how he describes it, it’s really difficult for me to understand a life where every single action is related to commerce. All I can really understand from that is how utterly different his life was compared to mine and Lutz’s.

“That’s certainly very different from how Lutz and I live, huh...”

“I’m sure kids from smaller shops are even more different, too.”

Lutz puts our gear down by the riverside, makes sure the fireplace is still intact, and sets up the pot. I draw some water from the river, pour it into the pot, and set the steamer on top of it. Today, I throw in potato-like kalfe roots in as well.

“I’m going to go cut some wood,” says Lutz. He looks up at Benno. “What will—”

“Lutz,” Benno interrupts, “if you’re going to work at my shop, start calling me ‘sir’.” “Sir, what will you do? Are you going to stay here and wait with Maïne, come with me to cut wood, or...” “I’m interested in the kind of wood that you’ll be cutting, so I’ll go with you. Shall we?”

Lutz and Benno head deeper into the forest to search for wood. I collect whatever firewood I can find in the area around the pot, keeping an eye on our things. The two of them eventually come back, carrying a lot of freshly-cut wood. When Benno looks at me sitting idly by the pot, he raises his eyebrows a bit.

“You’re not doing anything?”

“You asked me what I can actually do, right? Right now, my job is to sit here and be quiet. If I faint, there usually isn’t anyone here to carry me back home.”

When Lutz isn’t by my side, that’s when I have to try my hardest to move

around as little as possible, or so I'm constantly told. There have been many, many times where I've arbitrarily started doing things on my own and wound up causing a lot of trouble for everyone.

"...Lutz, you always surprise me with how patient you are."

"That's right!" I say. "You're really amazing." "Stop it, Maïne!" he says, giving me an embarrassed glare. "I'm gonna go grab some more firewood."

He makes his escape, and Benno and I grin at his back as he runs off. Then, I pull out my knife. I start picking folin out of the pile of wood Lutz brought back and cutting it down to a size that will fit into the steamer. Meanwhile, I keep telling Benno about Lutz.

"Lutz really is amazing. If he hadn't been there, I don't think I'd even still be alive. The first time the devouring tried to swallow me, he saved me."

"Oh?" he says, looking a little impressed. "Back then, before we started doing things that actually made money, Lutz was always looking after me, and helping me make a lot of different things." "...Ah, I'd heard about that. So, Lutz is basically your patron, then?"

It was entirely possible for me to have hogged all of the profits to myself for our winter handiwork and our paper-making enterprises. To a merchant, it must seem very strange for me to split the rights and profits for the things I've been dragging him into.

"That's right. Since Lutz basically saved my life, I've been doing what I can to help him. Although all I've really been able to do is come up with new things to make, and then once we have that, sell them through you and make money off of that."

"...Ah, I see. So, I need to make sure to keep him at my store at any cost, hm." "Thank you for your continued support," I reply.

Benno pats me on the head, as if to say "leave it to me", and I feel relieved.

By the time I finish cutting the folin down to sticks of about the same length, Lutz comes back. He adds some water to the pot, and I use my

cooking chopsticks to put the wood into the steamer, taking out the potatoes already in there.

“Lutz, quick, add the butter!”

“Yeah, I know!”

He sticks some butter in it, giving us buttered potatoes. Benno looks down at the potatoes lined up on the plate-substitute board with the same unimpressed expression that Lutz had the first time he’d tried it.

“Master Benno, sir, Maïne’s cooking is really delicious. Even if it’s just a potato.”

Lutz laughs excitedly as he bites into his potato. Seeing this, Benno shrugs, lifting his potato to his mouth as if he doesn’t have much choice in the matter.

“...That’s actually good.”

“Eh heh heh, steaming it actually locks in all of the flavor, and biting into a piping hot potato on a cold day is really extraordinary.”

After we finish eating our potatoes, we ask Benno to keep an eye on the pot for us while Lutz and I start foraging. We manage to gather a few medicinal plants.

After the bark is steamed, we rinse it in the river water and immediately start stripping it off. Benno helps us as well, but he’s unexpectedly clumsy with his knife, and leaves the bark in tatters. As he helps us, I watch our total amount of usable bark slowly decrease.

“Mister Benno,” I say, “we’re all done with stripping the bark now. Could you please help Lutz clean up?”

Since we’re done stripping bark, we head back to the storehouse and hang the bark up to dry. Benno wrinkles his nose when we ask him to hang the bark on the nails we have pounded into the shelves, but helps us out anyways. I’m a little envious of how he doesn’t need to slowly inch a footstool along as he works in order to reach the top shelves.

“Like this, if we had any more bark then we wouldn’t be able to dry it. If

we wanted to dry that much, then you'd want to build something like this."

I sketch out diagrams on my slate, explaining some of the tools we don't have at the workshop. Benno nods, asks questions, and picks up some of the tools we do have to feel them.

"We'll dry this batch of bark in the sun until it's completely dried. If we don't make sure it's entirely dry, then it might start getting moldy. Then, we'll take the dried bark and soak it in the river for at least a day."

"Hm, that could be stolen then." "That's right. That's the part that's the most worrying. If someone knows how this is made, then here's where the money is. That's why I think it's all the more important for the workshop to be near the river."

As I continue talking, I pat the bag of ash sitting in the corner of the workshop.

"After soaking the bark in the river, we use our knives to strip off the outer bark, boil the inner bark with ash, and then soak it in the river for another day. Boiling the bark with the ash makes the fibers soft and flexible."

"I see..." "After that, we remove any impurities or defects from the fibers, then beat the fibers with this rectangular stick here until they're as soft as cotton. This specific one is sized for Lutz, so an adult man could use a much larger and heavier stick, which would be more efficient."

I point at the table we use for beating fibers, and Benno picks up the stick and waves it around. "I would want something heavier if I was going to be smashing things," he murmurs.

"Then, we take the now-fluffy fibers and mix them with a sticky fluid called a binding agent, making pulp. Since we're using this paper frame, we can make it in this tub, but an adult would be able to use a much bigger paper frame, so increasing the size of both the frame and the tub would let you make much more paper. To mix the pulp we've just been using a bunch of cooking chopsticks that Lutz made tied together, but if you're using a big vat then you wouldn't be able to mix the entire thing together like that, so you'd want to use a larger tool, something like a large

comb to mix it. Something like this.”

I sketch out another diagram on my slate. Benno hums thoughtfully, and starts stroking his chin.

“After that, we use this paper frame. We shake and tilt it around like this, to make sure that it all ends up the same thickness, then take the finished sheet and pile it here, on the paper bed. We let it dry on its own, giving us this,” I say, indicating the pile of mostly-dried paper on the bed. “Tomorrow, we’ll put a weight on top of the pile, drying it out even more.”

“What for?” “This will squeeze the last of the stickiness from the binder out. After that, we stick each sheet to that board over there, one by one, and let it dry out in the sunlight. Once we peel it off from there, the paper is finally done.”

After I finish my rough explanation of the entire process, Benno lets out a long sigh, seeming to admire our work.

“This is a much longer process than I’d thought,” he says. “Well, while it’s drying, then you can work on something else, so it doesn’t really feel like that long of a process. If you want to make a lot of it, I think you’d wind up very busy. Besides, right now, actually going into the river is extremely difficult.”

Benno nods deeply, having helped us draw water from the river today. “So this’ll be the kind of workshop that shuts down in the winter,” he mutters. If you couldn’t put the wood in the river during the winter, then it would be too hard to work with, so you couldn’t make any paper.

“Since you can’t make it without a river, please make sure you think very hard about the location of the workshop itself.”

“Alright, got it. Looks like things are going to be pretty hectic for me, then!”

Despite the fact that he says things will be hectic, he looks like he’s actually enjoying himself. You can do it! I think to myself, silently cheering him on.

I thought that at that point everything would be completely out of my

hands, but Benno, having only a little practical experience making paper, excitedly starts picking out workshops, the people who wind up being extremely busy are me and Lutz. When we're not making paper, Mark sticks to us like glue, escorting us around to various craftsmen to help him order tools and equipment. "This is still covered under your information fee," we're told, and are given no choice but to go along with it.

Chapter 63: Lutz's Apprenticeship

Preparations

"Maïne, what should we do today? The weather looks pretty bad."

The dull, heavy clouds that blanket the sky outside my window aren't at all ideal for making paper. It might still be possible to go to the forest to forage, but if it suddenly starts pouring I'll just wind up being a huge burden, so I should probably just stay home and watch the house.

This spring, on days when we've been blessed with good weather, we worked on making paper to earn some money. When the weather wasn't quite so good, we went with Mark, wandering around the city as we worked on getting the workshop ready. However, by now, the workshop is basically finished and all of the workers have been trained. The other day, they even successfully finished their trial run, so by now there's not a whole lot left for me and Lutz to do.

"Mister Benno said that our baptismal ceremony is next Fire Day, so I wanted to do our last round of paper making, but I guess we can't help the weather being as bad as it is, huh..."

"Kinda sucks about not being able to do another batch of paper, but man, I still can't believe that I have so much money now, right?"

Every time we went to deliver our paper, we each brought back one small silver coin with us for spending money, which we gave to our families. This meant that our food situation had gotten a little bit better, but our lifestyles ultimately hadn't really changed all that much. The amount of money we have stored with the guild, however, is enormous, partly due to just how comparatively great the weather has been for paper making and partly due to the fact that tronbay paper sells for an enormously high cost. After our most recent sale the other day, I now have a little more than two large gold coins' worth of money saved up, and Lutz isn't very far behind at all. No matter how you think about it, this is not the kind of money pre-baptized children should have.

Well, I guess that once we're baptized, I won't be earning any money for a little while, after all.

I think to myself, going over the list of what we needed to do before the day of our baptismal ceremonies, then suddenly look up in shock.

"Lutz, we need to go see Mister Benno today. I completely forgot!"

"Huh? He's not expecting us, is he?" "Oh, he isn't, but our baptisms are next Fire Day, right? We need to make sure that you've got everything that you'll need for your apprenticeship already prepared. ...Your parents aren't merchants, so they won't have any tools prepared for you, you know?" "... Ah!"

Since a child's baptism marks the day they start working, it's tradition for those children to be given the clothing and equipment they'll need for their new apprenticeships. When a child follows in their parents' footsteps, their parents pick out those tools to give to them as presents, as if to say, "do your best".

However, Lutz's parents haven't been able to prepare him anything. One reason is that Lutz's father still objects to this course of action. Another is that since neither of his parents are merchants, neither of them know what tools he'll actually need. Even worse, they don't even know just how much money it would take to get someone prepared to be a merchant's apprentice.

Benno told us that clothing was necessary, and we'd placed an order, but I can't believe that that could possibly be enough. When Tuuli, a seamstress's apprentice, was baptized, our parents gave her not just a set of work clothes but also a kit full of sewing supplies. It's highly likely that a merchant is going to need much more than just clothing. Luckily, we've saved up quite a lot of money, so we should be able to buy whatever we need to ourselves, and if we ask Benno or Mark, they'll probably tell us what we need to know.

"I really don't know what else you'll need besides clothes," I say. "Since you'll be doing a lot of studying as part of your new hire training, you'll need your slate and your calculator, but there's got to be more than just

that, right?"

"Right now, we can buy whatever we need. I'm really glad we saved up all that money, just like you said."

Even though Auntie Karla had become Lutz's ally, there really wasn't much of anything she could actually do to help her son become a merchant. She doesn't have any connections to any merchants, and Lutz's father still opposes his decision. All she was really able to do is scold his brothers for their bad behavior, but Lutz has told me that even just that has made his life a little easier.

"When you become an apprentice, Mister Benno is basically going to be acting as your guardian, so I think it would be best for us to go ask him about it," I say.

I grab my usual tote bag and head out into the gloomy weather with Lutz, walking towards Benno's shop.

"Oh my, but I thought you weren't going to have any more paper for us for another few days?"

Mark, who has more-or-less figured our schedule out by now, looks a little surprised to see us approach.

"We're hoping to ask Mister Benno about something," I say. "...Although, maybe we might be able to ask you?"

I think I remember hearing that Mark was in charge of educating apprentices at this shop, at least.

"What might you need?"

"We'd like to know what kinds of things, such as tools, an apprentice might need. Lutz's parents aren't merchants, so they don't know what kinds of work-related things to give to him at his baptism, so we need to prepare these ourselves..." "Ahh, I see," he says, looking a little astonished. "I hadn't thought of that." He frowns slightly, tapping on his temples.

"I know the ceremony is very soon," I say, "but do we still have enough time? Since Mister Benno will be Lutz's guardian, would it be best for us to

discuss this with him?”

“Hmm, you’re right. After you’ve finished your discussion with the master, shall we go purchase what you need?”

As usual, we’re led into the inner room. There, we see a busy-looking Benno, sitting at a desk piled high with boards and papers, quickly scribbling something down.

“Master Benno,” says Mark, “Lutz and Maine have come to see you.”

“What for?” he asks, not looking up as he continues to write on his board.

I gently push Lutz forward, urging him to ask on his own.

“Master Benno, sir, I would like to ask you about the equipment I’ll need to prepare for my apprenticeship,” he says. “The equipment you’ll need to prepare...?”

Benno puts his pen down, perhaps having reached a good stopping point. He has a dubious expression on his face, like he isn’t quite sure what Lutz is asking, so I step in to explain further.

“Ordinarily, we were thinking that his parents would prepare these things, but since neither of Lutz’s parents are merchants, they don’t actually know what he needs. So, what will Lutz be needing when he becomes an apprentice? Surely it’s more than just clothes, right?”

“Ahh, that’s right. Go with Mark to buy your things. I got word that the clothes you ordered before are done, so go order a few changes of clothes when you go pick those up.” “Alright,” I say, nodding.

Lutz looks confused, slowly tilting his head to the side.

“Changes of clothes?”

“Obviously,” replies Benno. “There’s no way you’ll wear the same set of clothes to work day after day, will you? It’ll be a big problem if they get dirty or start stinking.”

Since this is a shop that deals with the nobility, appearance is extremely important. An employee would absolutely not be able to show themselves

in torn or dirty clothing. Practically every employee of this shop is always dressed very tidily.

“A change of clothes for every day, sir?” Lutz asks, frowning. “That’s right.”

“...You kidding me?”

In Tuuli’s case, and probably Lutz’s brothers’ cases as well, her work clothes get washed once a week. It’s work that our mother does on her day off, so the concept of changing clothes every day doesn’t even really exist. Since we don’t even have much in the way of ordinary clothing, we keep wearing the same set of clothing for as long as any freshly-laundered clothing is still drying. Also, when fabric gets washed, it gets damaged bit by bit, so there are many families that, with the exception of underwear, avoid washing their clothes for as long as they can bear it.

Unlike Benno, who has subordinates to do it for him, Lutz is on the bottom of his family’s hierarchy. It would probably be very hard for him to ask his mother to wash an entire week’s worth of changes of clothing. However, this is something that is definitely required for work.

“If you can’t ask Auntie Karla,” I say, “what if you washed it yourself? You’ll have some free days when you’re an apprentice.”

“Urgh...” “If you were a live-in apprentice, then you’d have to do it all by yourself anyway, you know.” “I... guess... you’re right.”

I can understand his astonishment; this isn’t at all in line with what he’d thought was common sense. However, there’s nothing he can do now but swallow this new information about what society expects common sense to be.

“I know how shocking it is to be hit with something that doesn’t fit your common sense, but you can’t really do anything else but accept it. This is something that you need to do to make sure that the customers don’t get uncomfortable. It’s just another way craftsmen and merchants are different.”

“Ah, okay,” he nods.

Benno, as well, looks like he's experiencing some culture shock. He blinks, slowly, muttering to himself.

"Your lives really are fundamentally different, huh."

"So, please," I say, "if you think something might be a little strange, please point it out. We really don't know anything about it." "Alright, I'll keep an eye out. ...Mark, I'll leave these two to you." "Very well, sir."

We wait briefly for Mark to reach a stopping point in his own work, then the three of us head to pick up our finished clothing. He carries me in his arms along the way there, but after an entire spring of being carried around while making arrangements for the new workshop, I'm fairly resigned to my fate.

"Welcome," says the shopkeeper.

With a single glance at Mark, Lutz, and me, she immediately realizes what we're here for, and she urges us towards rooms deeper in the shop.

"Please, try these on."

The clothing that she presents me with is just a simple blouse and skirt, but since it's cut to my exact measurements, it fits me perfectly. I'd be extremely excited just for clothing that isn't patched together, but this is order made. I experimentally raise and lower my arms, squat down, and stand back up, checking for any problems with the fit, but it feels incredible. It fits amazingly, with no parts of it too tight or too baggy.

"Amazing! This feels great to wear," I say. "Oh, excellent!" she says. "Now, Mark said you'll be wearing this today, so I'll wrap up these clothes for you here."

It seems that Lutz had ordered two more sets of clothes in the same style and design while I was still trying on my clothes. When I leave the dressing room, Mark and Lutz, who had been talking with the shopkeeper, turn to look at me.

"You look very cute wearing that," says Mark. "A simple change of clothes has made you look like a child from a good family."

“Yeah, you look like a proper lady!” adds Lutz.

Being praised by the two of them like that gets me even more excited. I pinch up the folds of my skirt.

“Really?! I’m cute? Like a proper lady? With just some new clothes?”

“When you’re standing still and not talking,” says Lutz. “Hmph,” I sulk. “...But, Lutz, your posture has gotten a lot better lately, too, so you’re looking like a proper gentleman!”

Benno has been reminding Lutz to mind his personal appearance, so he’s been keeping himself as clean as he can, and occasionally washing his hair with rinsham. His golden hair is glossy and sparkling. Also, he’s been paying more attention to his posture and movements, saying that he’s copying Mark because I keep talking about how excellent he looks. So, now that he’s in a proper set of clothes, he really does look gentlemanly. He doesn’t look out of place wearing them at all.

“Now we will be able to actually enter the other establishments we need to go to,” says Mark.

It’s not rare to be turned away at other stores for being improperly dressed. After Lutz and I use our guild cards to finish paying for our clothes, Mark leads the two of us, in our proper garments, towards the next shop.

We arrive at a stationery shop, and Mark opens its wooden door, which has the mark of a pen drawn on it. The front of the store is dominated by a long counter, behind which stands a kindly-looking old man, polishing something. Products are neatly lined up shelves along the wall, but since this store doesn’t sell many goods directly, these are largely just individual samples. This is a fairly typical sort of shop in this town. Small shops are primarily reception areas for their customers, with most of their actual goods in storehouses. It’s a necessary measure to protect against robbery, but it’s somewhat of a shame that you can’t easily compare products against each other.

“Mister Mark! What can I get for you?”

“Hm, let me see. We’ll need an ink pot, a pen, and parchment for a contract of employment. We already have a slate, slate pencil, and calculator, I believe? Then, if we add some number of writing boards, that should be it.”

As I listen to Mark, I let out a small sigh. These are definitely not the kinds of things that Lutz’s parents would be able to afford. Lutz and I may be able to afford them now, but neither ink nor parchment are things that we could be able to so easily buy in our usual sphere of influence.

“Oh, me too!” I say. “I’d like a pen and some ink, please.”

Seizing the opportunity Lutz’s errands have afforded me, I also purchase a pen and an ink pot for myself. Being able to buy ink, which is such an expensive, unobtainable item, leaves me deeply emotional. The old shopkeeper places pen and ink on top of the counter for me. After we touch our guild cards to complete the transaction, I reach out and pick them up.

“Woohoo! My own pen and ink!”

My smile almost splits my face wide open as I twirl around, holding my new bottle of ink and my wooden pen. However, Lutz’s smile, unlike mine, is bitter.

“All that money I saved is just going away bit by bit. ...Does being a merchant really cost this much?”

In a small shop, they’d probably have the necessary tools already prepared. They also probably wouldn’t make their employees buy parchment for their own employment contracts, either. They’d usually use wooden boards for that, I think?

“I don’t think it’s just being a merchant. I think it’s that Benno’s shop is so big. But, you should still have money left over, right?”

“But, I mean, we spent so much of it, in just one day! That doesn’t really feel good. I don’t want to have to rely on my parents, so let’s try to make even more paper before our baptismal ceremony.” “We really don’t have much time left, so it’ll be good if it clears up soon, yeah.”

We return to Benno's shop and deliver him the news that we've finished our shopping. "From now on, wear those clothes whenever you come here," he tells us, giving us the stamp of approval now that he can see us looking properly apprentice-like.

"Hey, Lutz. Where are you going to store all this? The storehouse?"

"That's probably safest, huh..."

The two of us start discussing how leaving the things we buy in the storehouse for safekeeping would be a bit of a pain, since we'd need to borrow the key in order to get into it. Benno, overhearing this, shrugs his shoulders.

"There's no real reason to keep any of that in the storehouse, why not just keep it in your own room?"

"Umm," I say, "Mister Benno. We don't have our own rooms. I only have a wooden box to keep my things in, and I can only keep what I can fit in there."

Benno's eyes widen when I point out this difference in our standards of living. When I saw Corinna's house, I'd noticed that there were a lot of rooms. It seems that Benno, who was raised as the successor to a large shop, didn't have any friends who didn't have their own rooms, either.

"I've got it worse than Maïne," says Lutz. "Even if I put stuff in my box, someone will just arbitrarily rummage around in there and take it all out."

"What do you mean by that?"

Benno's eyes are filled with surprise. He squints down at us, uncomprehendingly, and I explain Lutz's living situation a little more, "Lutz is the youngest of four brothers. So, his older brothers often just do whatever they like with his things. It's really rough."

"So, the brothers are always stealing each others' things?" "It's okay if it's the younger brother's things, they say. A younger brother's things are an older brother's things. The older brother's things are only the older brother's things, though."

Benno rubs his temples as he listens to my description of Lutz's home life. I'm sure he had no idea that our living situations could possibly have been this different. As a working man who has supported his family ever since his father died, Benno has probably never had to worry about his family stealing his things, nor has he ever had to worry about where to keep his things to begin with. His expression is one of sheer astonishment.

"Lutz. How about you store your things upstairs? I'll rent you one of the live-in apprentice rooms for cheap. If all of these things that you've finally put together disappear before your baptismal ceremonies, or if the things you need for work get stolen, that would be a big hindrance to your work here. That storehouse is too far away, too."

"...Thank you very much, sir."

Through Benno's arrangement, Lutz manages to rent one of the rooms on the top floor of the building that are usually used by live-in apprentices, and use it as a better substitute for our storehouse. If he leaves the things that he's purchased here and locks the door behind him, then he won't have to worry about any other person going through any of his things.

"So, when I come to the shop, can I come up here first to get changed?"

"Sounds great," he says. He wears an enormous smile over having finally acquired a space of his own.

I leave my things here too until we can finally go home. Benno had told us that, since we had some time, we were going to the merchant's guild with him, so we won't be able to head home immediately.

"If I don't teach you some things about how the guild works in advance, I can't use you to run errands, after all."

Since the children of mercantile families constantly visit the guild to help out their parents, it seems like going there to help retrieve documents is a fairly everyday sort of thing for them to be doing. So, one of the things that an apprentice at a shop can do from the very start is run errands at the guild. Even so, Lutz hasn't been back to the guild ever since we went to deliver Freida's hairpins, so of course he can't run any errands there. He

just hasn't ever done so before.

"Is there anything else...?" mutters Benno, trying to figure out what other things a merchant's child would be expected to be able to do. He gathers up a few written applications and hands them to Lutz to bring to the merchant's guild. I decide to tag along, mostly so that I can read the stacks of wooden tablets they keep on their bookshelves.

"Whoa..."

"Man, this is nuts."

The merchant's guild building overlooks the central plaza. In front of it, many wagons are lined up in a long queue. I can see traders leaving their carts in the hands of their fellow passengers as they run into the building, applications in hand. We're still outside, but already I can see how massively congested everything is.

"It looks like the second floor is going to be very busy," I say. "Yeah," replies Benno. "The baptismal ceremonies are just around the corner, and market day is pretty soon, too."

Just like I'd predicted after seeing all of the carts outside, the crowd packed into the second floor is enormous. Benno pushes his way through the crowd, Lutz trying to avoid being crushed behind him, as he makes his way towards the inner staircase. As usual, I'm being carried in Benno's arms, so I'm thankfully not getting crushed too. We show our guild cards to the guards in front of the stairway, and start to ascend. The tumult of the second floor almost instantly fades behind us. I have the strongest suspicion that the gate we passed through has some sort of magic on it to block out sound.

"Running errands is going to be really difficult, huh," sighs Lutz.

If we had to force our way through that oppressive wave of people without Benno's help, we wouldn't be able to run errands here at all.

"It's possible that your documents could get stolen or crumpled up by other people, so make sure you watch out for that."

"Yes, sir." "Now then, first off, these documents go..."

Benno starts heading towards the counter, giving Lutz an explanation as he goes. I turn my back on the two of them and start heading towards the bookshelves, but Benno smacks me on the back of my head and grabs me by the scruff of my neck.

“And just where do you think you’re going, kid?”

“...I was going to go to those bookshelves and read.” “In your dreams. You don’t get to go off and read. You’re going to be the head of a workshop, so you need to learn all of this too.” “Yes, sirrr...”

Benno teaches the two of us how to use the merchant’s guild services, going over the minute details of how to use the reception desk, as well as the various places that particular documents need to be brought to. He makes sure to point out to me where magical contracts are registered and inspected, since I’ll be working to develop new kinds of goods.

“If you file a request here, you can inspect the magical contracts that are registered with the guild.”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Maïne!”

A pair of light pink pigtails rushes up towards us from the other side of the counter. There’s no mistaking who this is. This is the guild master’s granddaughter, Freida. She clearly looks like she’s here to work as an apprentice. I hadn’t even considered that I might run into her here, so I stand there in shock while Freida crosses her arms and pouts at me.

“Spring is nearly over, and you haven’t even been by to visit once!”

“Ah, sorry about that, I’ve just been so busy...”

I’m really sorry, but between making paper and establishing the new workshop, I’ve been extremely busy. I was thinking that, since I had fulfilled my promise to make sweets with you, I could just kind of break it off. If I were to go, you’d inundate me with invitations, and I wouldn’t know exactly how to spot the traps you’d hide in our conversation, so I wouldn’t be able to relax at all.

“Well, I’m free tomorrow, so you’d be most welcome to come and play at my house,” she says. “Oh? Umm, but, if the weather clears up tomorrow,

then—”

Benno has been lightly resting his hand on my shoulder, and he suddenly squeezes it while I was mid-sentence. I had been about to say that I wanted to make some more paper, but I’m suddenly reminded that he had told us that he wanted us to do everything we could to keep our involvement in the paper-making process a secret, so I hurriedly snap my mouth shut.

Freida glances briefly at Benno’s hand, then smiles sweetly. “If it’s raining tomorrow, then you’re very welcome to come over. It seems that you’ll be busy again if the weather clears up, but if it’s raining, perhaps you’ll come and play? I do recall you promised you’d stop by this spring, yet spring is just about at its end.”

“Urgh...”

If she phrases it like that, it’s hard to refuse. It’s true that if the weather is bad tomorrow I won’t be able to make any paper and will thus have plenty of free time.

As I waver, she piles on more pressure. “There’s so much I want to talk with you about, especially about the devouring.”

“Oh, I had some questions about that as well.”

The person I know who has the most knowledge about the devouring is, in fact, Freida. There’s things that I’ve been thinking I want to ask her about, so the chance to speak with her is actually really helpful.

When I say this, Freida’s face immediately lights up, and she claps her hands joyfully.

“So, if it rains, then this will be perfect! I’ll make some pound cake and have it waiting for you.”

“That sounds great. If it rains...”

Fascinated by the thought of pound cake, I agree to her proposal. Benno’s grip tightens on my shoulder even more. He smiles down at me, a blood vessel clearly popping out on his temple.

“Maïne,” he says, very patiently. “Mister Benno,” says Freida, smiling sweetly as she jumps in to save me. “we’re just talking about if it rains.”

“Yes, that’s right!” I add, looking up at him. “Only if it rains, you know?” I reach up and pat his hand gently as his fingers dig deeper into my shoulder.

“This idiot,” he grumbles to himself, then looks back down at me. “It will rain tomorrow,” he says, matter-of-factly. “Huh?”

Chapter 64: Contract with Freida

It's raining today. There's no doubt about it, it's raining today.

The patter of heavy raindrops hitting the wooden shutters of the kitchen window causes my shoulders to slump as I sit there, eating my breakfast. Just like Freida had been laughing about, and just like Benno had been growling about, it is definitely raining. There's no helping it, then! Since it's already been determined that I'm going to have to go to Freida's house, at the very least I'm going to try my best to get at least a little bit of good information out of her.

Lutz will be there too, so everything will be fine.

I take a hard hunk of millet bread, soak it in some of last night's leftover soup, and chew soggily on it. I use the last of my bread to wipe off my plate, then, having finished breakfast, start looking around the room. I let out a long sigh.

"I want to bring some sort of present, but we really don't have anything here that I could bring to that house, do we..."

Freida's house is already full of the kinds of things the nobility keep in their houses. There's nothing here that I could possibly give to a girl who already has everything.

Tuuli gulps down some water, then looks at me, head tilted to the side.

"What about some 'simple shampoo'? She was really happy when you brought her some last time, right?"

"Hmm... it's gone on the market already, so Benno told me that if I was going to keep making some for myself, then I can't be giving it away as much as I want." "Oh, I see. And it's raining, too, so you can't pick any flowers or anything like that... yeah, that's kind of a problem."

Tuuli uses a little bit of water from the water jug to wash off her plate as she talks to me. When she finishes rinsing it, she starts hurrying to get ready to head off for work. Our mother has already left, and our father is currently fast asleep after coming home late from the night shift. I start

washing my own plate as well, trying to keep my voice down.

“If only we could have decided this a few days in advance. Then I could have gone to the forest on a sunny day and picked some fruit to take with me...”

Benno’s been so accommodating towards Lutz. He’s been so accommodating towards me as well, helping me set up Maine’s Workshop so that I can keep thinking up new product ideas. Lately, I’ve been really trying to avoid doing anything that will make him angry. Sure, I’ve carelessly let slip a few secrets while chatting, and sure I’ve fallen prey to my own desires and just kind of arbitrarily made a few things, but none of that was intentional. There’s no way that I actually wanted him to be angry at me. So, if I want to avoid his wrath, rinsham is out. Anything at all to do with paper is out. If I bring a new dessert recipe, then both Freida and Ilse would be happy, I think, but Benno would absolutely get angry, so that’s out, too.

Well, now that I’m not going to be his apprentice, it really is entirely my own business who I give my sweets recipes to, I think, but it would still be more trouble than it’s worth.

As I hum thoughtfully to myself, a loud knock comes from the kitchen door. Tuuli, looking just about ready for work and having just finished putting on a thick cape that has been treated with oil and wax to ward off the rain, heads towards the door.

“Hello, who’s there?” she says.

Ah, I guess Lutz is a little early today, I think to myself, as I put away my clean plate. Suddenly, Tuuli’s startled voice rips through the kitchen.

“Freida?! Why are you...?!”

As soon as I hear those entirely unexpected words, I snap my head around to see Frieda standing outside our front door, accompanied by an attendant. Despite the rain, she is dressed as magnificently as ever, and her attendant wears a tidy uniform. They clash horribly with the impoverished backdrop of my home, emphasizing just how poor my family really is.

“I have been so excited ever since I woke up that I just couldn’t stand it, so I’ve come to pick Maïne up,” she says, smiling sweetly.

I hear an undercurrent of “did you think I’d let you escape?” buried in those words, and a shiver runs down my spine. I want to look away and pretend not to have seen any of this, but I can’t just flee and leave Tuuli behind.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, smiling as she waves me over, “you must have been really excited to come all this way in this kind of rain!”

Tuuli, you’re an angel. Don’t lose any of that purity.

“Ah, but it is exactly because of the rain that I have come! I couldn’t possibly ask frail Maïne to walk outside in weather like this. I have a carriage waiting for us on the main road.”

It seems she thought I might have refused to come because I didn’t want to catch a cold in the rain. I can’t help but be a little impressed with her level of preparation.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, an innocent envy showing on her face, “a carriage?! Wow, Maïne, luckyyy!”

Freida looks over at Tuuli, noticing that she’s carrying her things for work.

“Oh my,” she says, slightly tilting her head to the side, “but are you not leaving for work, perhaps?”

“That’s right,” replies Tuuli, a twinge of regret in her voice. “I’ve got to get going soon.”

Frieda glances away momentarily as if thinking about something, then suddenly claps her hands together, a meaningful smile floating across her face.

“Well, if that’s the case, perhaps we can drop you off along the way.”

“What?! Really?! I can ride the carriage too?!”

Tuuli’s face lights up immediately. A carriage is the kind of thing that poor people like us would ordinarily never get to ride on. I understand her

excitement perfectly. It looks like I don't have any choice but to get ready to go immediately.

"Tuuli, I've got to go get Lutz," I say. "Ah, that's right! I'll go run and get him."

"Oh," says Freida, "but, if Lutz comes along, then you won't have anywhere to sit..."

Tuuli sets down her bags and starts to dart out the door when Freida apologetically stops her. At this point, whenever I go out, Lutz comes along with me as my minder. But, if Lutz comes with us, then Tuuli won't be able to ride in the carriage, and will have to back out.

"Huh? Um? ...Then, I... can't go?"

Her brief glimmer of hope turns to despair. She hangs her head, looking like she's on the verge of tears. As I frantically try to figure out what to say to comfort her, Freida smoothly steps in. She takes Tuuli's hand and then, and then, gives her a gentle smile.

"Tuuli, today, Maïne is my responsibility. I'll take care of picking her up and dropping her off. I can promise you that I will take extra care to make sure she does not fall ill. So, why don't you ride along with us?"

"...Maïne," says Tuuli, "if you're riding in the carriage, then you won't get tired, and you won't get soaked in the rain, you know? So it'll be fine if Lutz doesn't go with you today, won't it?"

Like hell it'll be fine!!

That's what I want to say, but I can't win against Tuuli's pleading stare. There's no way I can tell her to go walk to work because I'd be in trouble without Lutz there with me. Even just seeing how happy she looked to be able to ride in a carriage gets in the way of that idea. I don't want to go to Freida's house by myself, but I just can't turn her down.

"...Yeah, it'll be fine, Tuuli. You should come with us!"

"Thanks, Maïne. I'll go and tell Lutz, so you get ready."

Tuuli, in high spirits, runs off toward's Lutz's house, a spring in her step.

The sound of her footsteps quickly recedes into the distance, leaving only the tapping of the rain against the shutters. I glare fixedly at Freida, who just used my sister against me to get Lutz excluded.

“Freida...”

“Your sister seems quite happy, does she not?” “You’re right. ...Haahhh, I guess I don’t have a choice. I’m the one that didn’t tell her no, after all.”

I was the one who wasn’t able to toss Tuuli aside, so I can’t really blame Freida any more than this. I get my tote bag ready, thinking to myself how angry Lutz and Benno are going to be with me for acting without thinking again.

“Sorry,” I say, “but I wasn’t able to get a gift ready for you.”

“Oh my, but today you’re giving me a day of your time, are you not? Having the opportunity to speak with you is more than enough.”

She laughs airily, looking the very picture of a girl who’s delighted to be able to play with her friend, but I know very well that Freida is no ordinary, innocent little girl.

“Maïne,” says Tuuli, “I told Auntie Karla about us. C'mon, let’s go! I’m gonna be late.”

Tuuli’s smiling face and bouncing gait immediately disperses the gloomy atmosphere hanging between me and Frieda.

“Well then, shall we?”

We shut the door and head outside. Here, rain gear tends to consist of a thick mantle and a wide-brimmed hat. Of course, this isn’t able to protect perfectly against it, so it gradually gets soaked through if the rain is heavy or you need to be outdoors for too long. Today, though, we’re only going as far as the main street, through narrow alleyways, so I don’t have to worry about getting drenched.

“Quickly now, get on.”

I hurriedly board the carriage waiting for us at the main road, taking off my hat and mantle and setting them next to me. Freida’s attendant sits

outside, next to the driver, leaving just the three of us inside the carriage.

“Whoa,” says Tuuli, “is this what a carriage looks like on the inside?”

“Come, Tuuli, sit!” says Freida. “Would bringing you to the central plaza work for you?” “Yeah, the place I’m going is on the craftsmen’s road but it’s really close to the plaza.”

Freida urges Tuuli to sit as she looks gleefully around the carriage. I sit between the two of them. This carriage looks like it was built to seat two adults, but it fits three children just fine, with a little room to spare. When the carriage starts to move, it shakes and sways just as much as I remember, but unlike the time I’d ridden with Benno and the guild master, I’m sitting in a proper seat, so I don’t think I’m about to be flung into the air.

“It’s almost time for the baptismal ceremonies, is it not? Maïne, what will you be wearing, perhaps?”

“Oh, she’s going to be wearing my hand-me-downs,” says Tuuli, “but we’ve altered it so much that it doesn’t look like a hand-me-down anymore. It looks really extravagant!”

Tuuli’s chest swells with pride as she answers Freida’s question for me. During the winter, Tuuli helped our mother with the alterations from time to time, so there’s a few more decorations on the dress than there were before.

“...Extravagant?”

“I can’t really describe it, but I think it’s got kind of a different feel to it. Mom worked really hard on it, so it’s very cute!”

It’s likely that Freida, having just seen the condition of our house, is having trouble imagining what “extravagant” would look like for us. She has an expression of wonder on her face, but we’re really not lying. Plus, there’s a big difference between what people around here usually think “alterations” means and what I did, so it’s difficult to explain.

“Your clothing is really fluffy and amazing, too, Freida!” says Tuuli. “I want to try wearing something like that someday...”

“Why, thank you very much. So, did you perhaps make yourself a new hairpin?”

Freida, happy to hear Tuuli’s compliment, turns the subject towards hairpins. Apart from the one I’d made for Freida, every hairpin so far has been differently-colored variations on the same design. However, it seems like she can’t imagine that me making a hairpin for myself that looks exactly like all of the other ones out there, and is curious about what that might be.

“Oh, it’s a gift for her,” says Tuuli, “so I worked really hard on making it. It’s got three big flowers, like the ones we made for you.”

“Then, Maïne’s hairpin will match mine, perhaps?”

Freida looks at me, a little doubtfully, her head tilted to one side. Tuuli seems like she can’t really figure out how to properly explain it, so she tugs on my sleeve, looking troubled.

“Well, they’re white, and they sway, so even though the big flower are the same, they don’t really match. Right, Maïne?”

“We used unbleached thread, so they’re more of a cream color, although from a distance they look white. We’ve added some smaller flowers as well, but there’s still a few more differences between yours and mine. You should look forward to seeing it! Right, Tuuli?” “Yeah, if we tell you all about it now, then you’ll have nothing to look forward to.”

Tuuli covers her mouth, hiding an impish grin. Freida looks like she’s been caught up in it, grinning too.

“Well, then I really am looking forward to it! I’ll be watching for you outside.”

As we talk about the baptismal ceremonies, a row of workshops, where Tuuli works, comes into view around a corner. The carriage comes to a halt, and Tuuli puts on her mantle and hat. She grabs her bag full of tools, then shoots me a brief worried glance.

“Do not worry,” says Freida. “I will look after her the very best I can.”

“Tuuli,” I say, “good luck at work today!” “Thanks for letting me ride in your carriage, Freida. Maïne, I’m off, but don’t cause any trouble!”

She gives us a big wave, then takes off running towards the workshop. We wave goodbye, and the carriage starts clattering forward once again.

“Welcome, Maïne. Glad you could make it. I baked some pound cake today, and I’d love to hear what you think of it.”

When we arrive at Freida’s house, Ilse the cook is waiting for us. We’re led to the parlor, where tea and pound cake has been set out for us. I take a bite and immediately start to melt. The moist batter has been baked to a perfect shade of golden brown, and, perhaps because Ilse has adjusted for the oven’s peculiarities, the cake itself is much more delicious than it was last time.

“Delicious~... This is way tastier than it was before! You did an excellent job tweaking the recipe.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that! I’m curious, can you think of anything to make it even better?” “Improvement? ...Ummm, I think it’s delicious enough already, though?”

I take another bite of cake, savor its sweet flavor, and ponder for a moment. I know that she could plate it extravagantly when she serves it, or she could change the flavor by adding dried fruits or grated citrus peel, but I also know that just telling her this might be the kind of information provision that would get Benno mad at me.

Hmmm, if I do something, Benno will probably get mad, and this really is delicious even if it’s so simple, so there wouldn’t be any problems at all if I were to just stay quiet, but I really do want to help this extremely eager chef to improve her work.

“Well, it’s not an improvement, exactly, but... how about I tell you about it in exchange for a bag of sugar?”

I recall seeing a bag in the kitchen that looked like it contained about one kilogram of sugar. When I ask for that, Ilse looks over at Freida, who actually has the right to decide.

“A bag of sugar... would it be okay to give it to her, Miss Freida?”

“Yes, of course.” “Alright, I have the young lady’s permission, so! Tell me!”

The sheer ravenous force behind Ilse’s curiosity makes me squeak in momentary fright, but then I open my mouth to speak.

“If you grate ferigine peel and add it to the batter, that’ll change both the smell and the taste, and it’ll still be delicious. You could add other things, too, and those will change the flavor as well. As for what exactly to put in and exactly how much, please do some experimentation on your own. I’ll tell you this as a bonus, too: if you’re going to bring this out to serve to nobles, then you could thoroughly whip heavy cream and make a fringe around the edge of the cake, then decorate it with fruit to make it look really extravagant.”

“Hm?! I’m going to try that!”

Ilse gasps, then immediately stands up and leaves the room. Suddenly left behind, Freida and I blink a few times, then smile wryly.

“My apologies, Maïne, for showing you, my guest, such a sight. Ilse is usually so calm and composed, but as soon as she sees a new recipe...”

“It’s good to be eager to learn. If she tries her hardest, then just that will increase the number of tasty things out there, won’t it?”

A zeal for studying is something to be admired. I think that spreading tasty things throughout the world would be a very happy thing, so I definitely want to try experimenting with a lot of different things to try to create new kinds of sweetness.

“Come to think of it,” I say, around a big mouthful of pound cake, “why are you apprenticing at the merchants’ guild? Aren’t you going to be opening a shop in the nobles’ quarter? Can you really be an apprentice if you’re not going to actually be an employee?”

It’s already been arranged for Freida to go live with the nobility when she grows up, so I hadn’t even considered that she’d be apprenticing at the merchants’ guild.

Freida takes a sip of her tea. "It's something I asked my grandfather for. It's so that I can both study and make connections for when I'll be living in the nobles' quarter. When I open my shop, I'll be doing so all by myself. I can't go about thinking that it actually is a job that one person can do on her own, so I need to make as many personal connections as I can."

"All by yourself? You won't, uh, have any attendants, like Jutte?"
"Nobody but myself will be allowed to stay in the nobles' quarter. Although, when I go there, my partner will have prepared some attendants for me, so it is not like I'll be living entirely on my own."

Even still, I can't imagine that any attendants she'll have in the nobles' quarter will be at all familiar with economics or business management. Having a young woman who has just barely entered adulthood suddenly stripped of her allies and made to open a shop by her self... isn't that a little too harsh? Can't they let her have even one person to consult with?

"One person definitely cannot run an entire shop by herself," she continues. "My family will be allowed in and out of the nobles' quarter to deliver supplies and the like. They won't be by my side the entire time, but it'll be reassuring, will it not?"

"...I guess so."

I can't imagine that it'll actually be that reassuring, but I can see that Freida is fighting hard for her own destiny, looking straight ahead down her path. I can't really say anything besides to agree with her. The very grown-up way of thinking and speaking that she's learned are her weapons and armor. She must keep determinedly polishing them so that she can survive in the unknown world that waits for her.

"So, in order to make sure that I am able to handle whatever might occur after I establish my shop, I'm apprenticing with the guild and helping out at my family's shop."

"You're amazing, Freida. I can tell that you're putting a ton of thought into all these things that'll be happening so far in the future."

When I say that, she immediately gets a very stern expression on her face. She looks at me very seriously, then after a moment of silence, opens

her mouth to speak.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you as well. May I?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Ahh, here it comes, the main question, I think. It’s pretty obvious what she’s about to ask me. I smile, urging her on.

“What in the world are you thinking? Maïne, by all rights, should you not have extracted yourself from Benno’s employ and come to work with us? I’ve been waiting for you to do this. If you’re seeking connections, then coming here would...”

If I were seeking any connections with the nobility, then it would be much better for me to rely on Freida and the guild master than on Benno. This is something Otto pointed out to me as well. I think anyone would realize this. Working at a shop that already has a deep connection with the nobility would of course better my chances of finding a favorable solution, even if only a little. Freida made her offer with a self-confidence that’s grounded in her family’s history and influence. Now, her tone of voice is just a little fiery, and a hint of an unspoken impatience is showing through in her eyes.

“Summer is just around the corner, yet you haven’t made any move at all. Have you truly given any thought to what we discussed? If you’re not given to a noble as soon as possible, then the way things are going, you’ll...”

Freida’s complaint is based on her concern for me, since I have the same devouring disease that she does. Even if I am brought to a noble, it’s not a guarantee that I’ll be able to immediately form a contract. I actually feel a little self-conscious over how much she’s worrying about me, if her feeling that this needs to be quickly rushed through is being amplified by her overbearing nature.

I chuckle, returning Freida’s even stare.

“You know, Freida. After thinking about it a lot, I decided that I want to be with my family, even if it means wasting away.”

“...Huh?”

Freida freezes up, her eyes wide and mouth open. Her lips tremble, just a little, and she weakly mutters, “I can’t believe it...”

“I’ve halfway given up already. Since Tuuli started crying, I told her that I’d keep looking for some way to survive somehow, but there’s no other way to live with the devouring except to make a contract with a noble, is there?”

I’m sure that the guild leader, in order to save his granddaughter, would have used every scrap of his influence, his money, his connections, and every other useful thing he had to frantically search for every solution he could. He would have bought some time by gathering up magical tools in order to keep searching for any better method than making a contract. Not finding anything, he must have given up on his search and turned towards finding a noble who would grant a contract with the most favorable conditions, thinking that that was the only way forward. The answer is obvious.

“...I don’t know of any.”

“Honestly, I’ve been wondering if I might be able to find another magical tool somewhere that I could use, but I don’t think I want to make a contract with a noble. There’s no substitute for magical tools if I want to do something about the devouring, is there?” “If I knew of anything, I’d already be using it.”

She gives me an irritated glare, and I shrug my shoulders.

“I know, right? So, the question I wanted to ask you today is if it’s possible at all to buy magical tools from someone who isn’t a noble? Or maybe, could I make magical tools on my own, or something... that’s not possible, is it?”

I was thinking that if I couldn’t find any magical tools then I should try making some myself, but, unfortunately, none of the books I’d read as Urano contained any methods for creating magical tools. These concepts did exist in fantasy novels and games, but I don’t think that I can use any of those as reference material. Also, there’s no workshop here in the city

that produces magical tools.

“You need mana in order to make magical tools, and since only the nobility have mana, they’re the only ones who can make them. So, the only people who know the methods for making magical tools are behind those castle walls.”

“Alright. ...I’d been thinking that if I knew how to make them then I could just do it myself, but I guess it really is impossible.”

If only mana-possessing nobles could make them, then any workshop for making them would be on the other side of those tall ramparts. I’d been hoping that if I could just learn the manufacturing methods, then I could use all of my funds to make something happen, but I guess I really was just being naïve, after all.

“...I hadn’t even considered making my own,” says Freida. “That’s because you’re from a rich family,” I say, giggling. “In my world, if I decide that I want something, then if I don’t make it myself I won’t ever get it, so the very first thing I thought of was whether or not I could figure out how to make it myself... you know.”

Rinsham, paper, soot pencils, and chopsticks were all things that I needed, so I was driven to make them myself, as much as I was able.

“Is your family that important to you?” she asks, quietly. “You’re not scared of being swallowed up by the fever?”

“Umm, how do I put this. I don’t want to die, but I’m not really scared of it, I don’t think.”

I’ve already died once. Being able to live out Maïne’s life is just a bonus granted to me by God. I finally managed to make my life actually fun to live, but that opinion hasn’t fundamentally changed.

“...I don’t have any books right now, so my family is the only important thing I have. I’m not choosing to die, I’m choosing to be with my family. That’s all.”

“Books?” “Yeah. I’ve actually saved up quite a bit of money, so I wonder if I could buy one, maybe?”

I tilt my head, pondering, while Freida gives me a worried smile.

“If books are what you’re after, then shouldn’t you go to the nobles’ quarter after all? There should be many there, should there not?”

“Aaah, if a contract said that I could read books as much as I wanted, then I’d probably sign it on the spot, but do you really think a nobleman that would keep me around as a pet would let a poor commoner like me read something so valuable?” “The more I think about your living conditions, the more difficult they seem.”

From a noble’s perspective, I’m just a commoner from a city with a low literacy rate. Even though I know how to read, it still wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for them not to want me to touch any of the expensive, precious books that they themselves own. If I were to read them on my own, then they’d surely get mad. Plus, to a certain extent, I know myself. If there’s a book in front of me, there’s a good chance that I’ll lose all sense of reason. I can easily imagine myself leaping at a book and provoking someone’s wrath.

“...So, I’ve been thinking that, until I die, I want to try to set up some way to mass-produce books, but this seems really hard. When I think about how short my lifespan is thanks to the devouring, I get halfway to just giving up. I’m causing so much trouble for my family, so right now I want to earn as much money as I can so that I can leave it behind for them when I’m gone.”

As I light-heartedly joke about this, Freida’s light brown eyes suddenly flash with light.

“Then, perhaps you’d like to sell me the rights to your pound cake recipe?”

I look at Freida, whose eyes definitely have that merchant’s gleam now, and hum thoughtfully to myself. A pound cake is a very basic kind of sweet, but perhaps a time-limited monopoly might not be a big problem. Permanently giving her all the rights, like I did with Benno and the rinsham, would be problematic. It would undoubtedly get in the way of developing and spreading new sweets.

“...If I were to ask for five small gold coins for the right to monopolize sales on pound cake for one year, how would that sound?”

“I’d take that offer, of course.”

She didn’t even hesitate for a moment.

“...What do you mean, 'of course'? Did I make it too cheap?”

“Yes, that’s right. The rights to monopolize sales on a completely unprecedented new good, like pound cake or plant-based paper, could easily be worth more than a large gold coin.” “A large gold coin...”

Once again, it seems like Benno might have conned me into selling him all of my information for dirt cheap.

“Would you like to raise the price?”

“Nah, that’s fine. It’s only for a year, after all. I’ll sell you monopoly rights for five small gold coins.”

I’m not comfortable with raising a price after I already made my offer, so I shake my head.

“Well then, let’s write up a contract.”

“Huh? You mean, a magical contract?!”

Did this just get real scary? Am I going to have to see blood again and put innocent bystanders at risk? I start trembling uncontrollably, but Freida just lets out an amazed sigh.

“...Maïne. Contract magic is not something that you can use so easily. It’s something that you use when your opponent has both overwhelming magical and political power, putting you at an enormous disadvantage, and you need to use an extremely expensive magical tool in order to secure your profits. In our case, a regular contract written on formal contract parchment would be sufficient, would it not?”

“I guess you’re right.”

Since my first ever contract was a magical one, I guess my intuition might have been a little skewed. However, if what Freida is saying is

correct, then why would Benno use a magical contract with Lutz and I, who possess neither magical nor political power? This is a mystery.

“Nevertheless, how do you know about magical contracts, since they’re so rarely used?”

“...Mister Benno will get mad if I tell you, so it’s a secret.” “Oh my, you’re learning, aren’t you!”

She giggles to herself as she reaches for a bell on a nearby table. When she rings it, Jutte slips into the room, making barely a sound.

“Please get a written contract ready for us,” says Freida.

On the parchment that Jutte prepares for us, Freida uses a feather pen to outline the terms of our contract. Compared to the wooden pen that I bought, her quill certainly does look impressive, but I wonder if it’s just my imagination that it looks hard to use? To Freida, who is an apprentice at the merchant’s guild, this is ordinary, everyday work. For me, having been here for a while, this is something I’m at least familiar with. After we go over the contract to make sure there’s no discrepancies, we touch our guild cards together to finalize the deal.

“Why did you decide on a year?” asks Freida. “After a year, everyone will know that your shop is where pound cake was invented, won’t they? Also, by then, I think sugar will have spread around to more people, so I’m trying to leave some room for new entries into the market.”

“New entries?” “If the recipe is announced, then the number of competitors will multiply, and we’ll quickly start seeing new kinds of sweets, won’t we? Delicious sweets make people happy, so if there’s a lot of different people making them, and they start spreading everywhere, then I think that’ll be a good thing.” “Hah, you really don’t care at all about your own profits, Maïne. Being a merchant doesn’t suit you.”

Freida and I sign our names at the bottom of the contract parchment. With that, the contract between me and Freida to guarantee her monopoly rights for a year is complete.

“But, well, me announcing the recipe in a year does require that I’m

actually around then, doesn't it? If I'm not, then I'll leave that job to you."

"Hmph! I put my own profits above all else. If you want that recipe announced, then you'd better still be here next year to announce it yourself!"

Chapter 65: Baptismal Procession

The morning of my baptismal ceremony is busy, particularly for my mother. She has to put together breakfast, tidy up after it, and get both her and my father into their only set of nice clothes, so if I were to sleep in or chew sluggishly on my food, she'd get mad at me. Thus, I cram my breakfast down my throat so fast I feel I might choke, and while she's tidying up I retreat to the bedroom with Tuuli so that I can get changed.

Thanks to both Tuuli and my mother gradually making little additions to it here and there, my dress isn't just fluttery because of the extra fabric that's been pinned back. The two of them had used their skills at making lacework flowers, honed by a winter's worth of handiwork, to decorate the dress with little flowers here and there, and now it's almost excessively decorated. If Benno hadn't let me keep the leftover thread from our winter handiwork, they probably wouldn't have had the materials to do this with, I think.

My fluttery one piece dress rustles as I pull it on over my head like a t-shirt. I wrap the blue sash around my waist, and tie it tightly into a bow. The ends of it hang limply down past my shins.

"Maïne, didn't you have to double that up?" says Tuuli, frowning.

I untie the sash, and try wrapping it around myself twice. However, even though I'd been able to tie it off last winter, it's just a little bit too short now, so I can't make it into a good-looking bow.

"Huh? Have I been eating too much? Did I get a little chubby?"

"Oh, no! You just grew a little bigger." "Huh? I grew bigger?" "Probably, yeah. Look, we'd made the dress so that it would hang below your knees, but now it's only halfway down your knees instead. You got a little bigger!"

It seems that I've gotten a little taller in the space between winter and summer. If I were a normal child, this would be an obvious thing to have happen, but since my devouring is causing me to grow excessively slowly, I've never really felt as if I'm growing much at all. I stand there, deeply moved, trembling with joy, but Tuuli is a little more pragmatic. She stares

at ends of the sash, contemplating how everything fits together.

“...No matter how I look at it, the length just isn’t going to work. It’ll look untidy either way. Maybe we should cut it?”

“Oh no,” I say, “that would be a waste. It’ll look fine as it is, so there’s no need to cut it. I’ll just double it up.” “That didn’t work, though?” “I won’t wrap it around myself twice, I’ll just double up the bow.”

I wrap the sash around myself, then at my stomach tie a tight, two-fold, butterfly bow. Then, to complete the look, I rotate the sash until the bow is at my back, like when I put on a kimono.

“How does it look?” I ask. “Is the length okay?”

“So cute! That’s amazing! How did you do that?!” “Umm, well...”

As I try to figure out how best to explain it, my mother barges into the room.

“If you’re done changing, then get your hair done up. I’m getting changed now.”

“Okaay! I’ll tell you later, Tuuli.”

I quickly go out to the kitchen and start working on my hair. Last night, my entire family used some rinsham, so today everyone’s hair is smooth and glossy. Unusually, my father had looked like he wanted to be included in this, so I helped wash his hair too. When I tried asking why he was suddenly so interested, he said it was because Otto was bragging about how Corinna had washed his hair. Looks like he was a bit envious of that kind of life satisfaction.

“Let me do that for you, Maïne.”

As I start combing out my hair, Tuuli comes over, her eyes sparkling. It looks like since I’d done her hair for her on the day of her baptismal ceremony, she wanted to return the favor today.

“Since you do the twirly thing with your hair ornaments, I can’t help you there, so at least let me comb your hair for you.”

“Okay! Thanks.”

I hand over the comb and Tuuli gets to work, humming to herself. She seems to be in a really good mood.

“Your hair is so straight. It’s really beautiful! It smells good, too.”

“Your hair smells the same, you know?”

When Tuuli finishes, I thank her, then reach for my hairpin, my hair swaying behind me. I pick up the hairpin, careful not to crush the delicate-looking flowers, and then put my hair up as I usually do. Even if I’d thought about trying a more elaborate hairstyle, my hair can’t really be tied up with a string, so it would all quickly come undone.

“Alright then...”

Even though I’m using a different hairpin, I’m doing my hair the same way I always do, so I’m done with it almost immediately. This hairpin is somewhat heavier than the simple rod I usually use, and I can tell that whenever I shake my head the little flowers hanging off of it sway back and forth. When I start having a little fun shaking my head a bit, Tuuli claps excitedly.

“Whoa, cute!” says Tuuli. “That matches your hair color perfectly! And it’s so wonderful watching it sway whenever you move.”

“That suits you very well, Maïne,” says my mother. “You look like a princess,” says my dad. “You’ll be the cutest kid at the entire ceremony!”

My parents, both finished changing, come out of the bedroom and start complimenting me on how nice I look in my new dress. I’m happy for all of this open, unreserved praise, but it’s also a little embarrassing, too.

“Hey, Daddy, isn’t that what you told Tuuli, too?”

“Of course it is!” he says, grabbing me and Tuuli in each of his arms. “I’ve got the cutest two daughters in the whole wide world.”

Tuuli and I shriek, trying to free ourselves. He cackles, refusing to let us go.

“Aaah! You’ll mess up my hair!”

“Enough of that!” says my mother. “If you’ve got enough time to fool

around, then go and get outside already.”

My father immediately lets us go as soon as she says that, but it’s too late. As I catch my breath, my mother looks me over, sighing.

“Maïne, you’ll need to re-do your hair,” she says. “Sorry ’bout that,” says my father, shrugging apologetically.

I smile at him, then pull out my hairpin, shake out my hair, stick it back in, and fix it. Sure, my hair can’t ever be done in any sort of extremely elaborate hairdo, but thanks to its peculiar smoothness, even if it gets a little ruffled all it takes is a little bit of hand combing to sort it back out.

“Looks like everyone’s starting to gather outside,” says Tuuli, opening the front door wide and waving us over. We go downstairs and head out into the plaza around the well, where many of our neighbors have already started to gather.

“Oh, there’s Ralph and the others. Looks like Lutz is wearing Ralph’s hand-me-downs, too.”

I look over at where she’s pointing, and see Lutz, indeed wearing Ralph’s nicest hand-me-downs, surrounded by a large number of people. Since I didn’t actually see Ralph on his baptismal day, I wouldn’t have been able to tell that they were hand-me-downs if I hadn’t been told, though. Lutz is wearing a white shirt and pants, with a light blue sash tied around his waist. If I had to guess, this was probably made for Zasha, the oldest child in the family. Both the sash and the embroidery look like they’d match Zasha a lot better.

“Lutz—”

“Oh my, Maïne?! What is with that dress?! You look like a very rich little girl, don’t you!”

Before I can get to him, Auntie Karla catches me. Her loud, resounding voice quickly draws the attention of everyone around us.

“They’re Tuuli’s hand-me-downs,” I say. “Those are hand-me-downs?!”

“Yeah. It was way too loose around the shoulders, so we gathered it up

here and here and added straps, then there was extra cloth on the sides so we added some pleats here, and then it was too long so we rolled it up and sewed it in place. That's all, just some really simple alterations."

As I give a quick explanation, the nearby women all gather round, jostling each other as they try to get a better look. Since I'm far shorter than the average child of my age, they all have to stoop down to see. Being surrounded by all these people staring down at me from above is actually a little scary. I unconsciously reach behind me and grab tightly to my mother's skirt.

"Hmm! This doesn't look like it was an alteration at all. It looks quite splendid!"

"Oh, let me see! Aha, I see, you could do this because Tuuli and Maïne are so different in build. That won't work in our family..." "Ahahah, I'd thought the sash was a bit extravagant, but it was too long so you had to double it up, didn't you?"

As all these people are chattering amongst themselves however they like, they occasionally throw a "congratulations" or a "happy baptism day" at me, but they all feel very perfunctory.

"And this hairpin! It's so elaborate, isn't it? This must have been so expensive."

When they point out how pricey my hairpin must have been, my mother just laughs, shaking her head.

"We made it ourselves, so it wasn't very expensive at all. Since I was able to alter this dress to fit her, I had all sorts of thread leftover that I thought I'd need in order to make her own dress, so we used that."

"Really? My daughter said that she'd wanted me to buy her one of these for her baptism. Do you think you could teach me how to make them?" "You'll need some very, very fine needles to make it work. If you can get a pair of those, the rest is easy."

I hadn't expected her to interrupt at all! She's managed to redirect everyone's attention towards herself. Now that she's the one getting

flooded with questions, I quietly manage to slip away through the crowd of older women. Looks like having just a slightly different dress and a slightly different hairpin really did make me the target of a lot of interest after all.

Alright, escape complete.

The instant I let myself breathe a sigh of a relief, however, I immediately find myself surrounded by a ton of girls interested in both my clothes and my hairpin. These are all slightly older girls, who'd already had their baptisms by the time I was finally able to go to the forest. Aside from Tuuli, I didn't really have any contact with these people.

"Aaah, so cute!!"

"Let me see, let me see! Whoa, Tuuli made this, right? Amazing!"

A girl who seems like she's spent some time with Tuuli rudely grabs at my hairpin. It smoothly slides out and my hair falls down around me.

"Ah!"

"Oh, I'm, I'm sorry! What do I do..."

She turns green, clutching my hairpin, mortified that she'd just destroyed a hairstyle that must have taken ages to put together. I hold out my hand, though, smiling sweetly.

"It's okay! I can fix it."

She gives me my hairpin back, and I get to work fixing my hair. I quickly comb it out, wrap it tightly around the pin, and with a twist, secure it in place.

"Huh? What? What did you just do?! That's no ordinary decoration, is it?"

"Eh heh heh," says Tuuli, "It's just a decoration, yet it can hold hair in place. My little sister is really amazing, after all!"

Tuuli, for some reason, puffs up her chest proudly. After that, everyone takes turns admiring my two-fold bow and pinching my dress here and there, all the while Tuuli triumphantly explains everything. Everyone seems to be having a lot of fun, but ultimately everything they're saying

and doing is exactly what the older women had been saying and doing too.

I somehow slip away from that crowd as well, and breathe another sigh. Now that I'm finally not surrounded by so many unfamiliar faces, I suddenly realize just how tired I am. I start heading towards Lutz, hoping to find some place to take a breather.

"Lu~utz..."

"Oh, Maïne! Looks like you finally got away from Mom—"

He turns around to look at me and suddenly freezes.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Umm—" "Whoa, what's with that dress? That looks totally different from Tuuli's."

Ralph appears, pushing Lutz aside.

"We just altered Tuuli's dress from bef— gaah! Zasha, put me down!"

"Congratulations, Maïne! You're so tiny and cute. Way cuter than cheeky Lutz here!" "Maïne, happy baptism. That dress really suits you! But, man, you're really tiny. You barely even look like you should be getting baptized today, huh?" "I've gotten a little bigger! Not that you'd be able to tell, though!"

I'd sought out Lutz so I could finally relax, but now I'm surrounded by all of his older brothers. Lutz flushes red with embarrassment, and chases his brothers off.

"Oh no, Zasha! Maïne's looking kinda ill!"

"Whoa, Maïne. Hang in there. The ceremony hasn't even started, right?!"

Still held in Zasha's arms, I let myself go limp. Zasha, who'll come of age next year, already has the kind of stability a full-grown adult would have.

"I wanna go home..." I whine. "We haven't even left," says Lutz.

The temple bells start to ring in the distance, their rhythmic chiming resounding through the town. It's the signal that it's time to head towards the temple. Out of all of our neighbors who use the same well we do, the

only children getting baptized this season are Lutz and myself. The two of us are quickly surrounded by cheering adults.

“Maïne, let’s go! Onwards to the main street!”

With a jerk, my father lifts me out of Zasha’s arms and takes off towards the main street, at the head of the pack. After a moment, Lutz frantically chases after us. Over my father’s shoulder, I can see our families, as well as the other adults, following behind. In the street ahead, just like when Tuuli had her ceremony, I see children emerging from alleyways here and there, followed by their families. Then, crowds of spectators start pouring out, until the edges of the street are covered in people.

“Are you okay, Maïne?” asks my father. “Umm... maybe?”

In the distance, I can hear the sound of cheering grow louder. It seems like the procession is drawing near.

“Rest until we get you to the temple,” he says. “Okay, I will. Thanks, Daddy.”

It seems like my father will be carrying me all the way to the temple. After all, I can’t walk at the speed everyone else will be going at, and if I collapse in the middle of the procession, the whole thing will be ruined.

Behind the slowly-growing column of children dressed in white, their families follow behind. It looks like my father is going to try to put himself right at the end of the line of children, in the front row of parents. However, if Lutz stands here with us, he probably won’t be able to see anything but the people immediately around him.

“Lutz, do you want to go on ahead?”

“Nah, if we’re split up, then when we get to the temple I’d have to search for you, so I’ll stay here.” “Then, maybe you could walk near the edge? So that you can see Mister Benno’s shop on our way past.” “...Yeah, good idea.”

As I watch, the procession starts to pass us by. My father steps forward, me held in his arms, and Lutz follows us, joining the procession. From my tall vantage point, I can see everything around me, unlike during Tuuli’s

ceremony, when I'd been completely buried. On both sides of the main street, people are waving hugely at us, whistling shrilly, and showering us with blessings. The windows of the buildings that overlook the streets have been thrown open wide, and groups of people lean out of each, shouting congratulations down at us. The children ahead of us smile widely, filled to bursting with pride, and wave back at the people along the streets and in the windows.

"Maïne," says my father, "make sure you wave back at everyone. You're saying thanks."

"Oh, I see!"

With my father's prompting, I let go of him with one of my arms, and, with a smile, start to wave. I try to pattern my waving after the way members of the Imperial Family back in Japan would respond to cheers with their gentle smiles.

Yes, just like that! With elegance and grace!

Even if I had the determination, this isn't the kind of smiling or waving that I could suddenly figure out how to do on my own, but if I have something to model it after, then copying that isn't a problem at all. Plus, in this town, there's nobody to laugh at me for mimicking the Imperial Family. So, I smile as elegantly as I possibly can, and wave my hand in the most gentle, elegant manner that I can muster.

Whoa, people are pointing, am I standing out too much?!

I don't know if it's because being carried by my father makes me too conspicuous or not, but I feel like I might be attracting too much attention. But, since everyone's looking at the procession, I don't think there's any way that I'm the only one drawing attention here, though.

"Maïne," says my father, "my arm's getting a little tired. I'm going to switch."

"Okay," I reply.

While we wait in the central plaza for the processions from the other streets to arrive, my father shifts his posture. I've already seen everything

up until this point during Tuuli's ceremony. After everyone has gathered in the central plaza, we'll start proceeding towards the temple that sits in front of the castle ramparts.

From the central plaza, I can see that the temple is a building made of white stone that stands taller than the city's outer walls. In fact, it's as tall as the castle ramparts themselves. It's a large, splendid building, but between the long, narrow windows that line its surface and the fact that it's built so that it's almost jutting out from the castle walls themselves, I can't help but wonder if it was originally used as a fortress or if it was even part of the castle walls themselves.

Hmm, although, did they really take a building designed for soldiers to use and use it for religious purposes instead? In wartime, the temple probably sends out people to provide aid, but in ordinary times, they could probably build something like that with all the offerings, donations, and whatever other ways they could squeeze money out of their believers...

Since the only knowledge that I can base any of this speculation off of is what I know from Japan, no matter how much I think about it I can't actually be sure of anything. However, up until now, I haven't really thought at all about this institution they call "the temple", and haven't seen anything that even remotely resembles its architectural style or appearance, so it's kind of fun to try to puzzle my way around it.

Now that everyone's gathered, we start proceeding towards the temple. From this point on, both the people along the sides of the road as well as the children who join the procession are wearing noticeably different things. It's clear that the cloth itself is worth a lot of money, and even though the outfits are still basically all white, the cuffs and hems are all lavishly embroidered.

After we walk a little ways, Benno's shop comes into sight. Lined up in front, I can see Benno, Mark, Otto, and Corinna, all surrounded by other familiar faces from the shop.

"Lutz, I can see Mister Benno and Mister Mark! Mister Otto and Miss Corinna are there too to congratulate us."

“Seriously?”

Unlike me, who can see at the same level of my father, Lutz is in the middle of the procession, so it seems like he still can't see Benno's shop. When he finally spots it, he grins hugely and waves. Mark waves back, and all of the other employees follow suit, all shouting out as one.

“Lutz, Maïne, congratulations!”

I'm a little startled to suddenly stand out so much, but I'm thrilled to be congratulated by everyone, and I give them a huge wave back. With my spirits as high as they are, there isn't a trace of Imperial dignity left. Otto embraces Corinna with his left hand and waves at us with his right. Corinna waves at us as well, smiling gently.

“Make sure you stop by to say thanks on your way back from the temple,” says my father to Lutz, reaching down to ruffle his hair as he walks beside us.

The two of us, of course, nod emphatically.

“Hey, Maïne,” says Lutz. “Do you think Master Benno looks a little shocked?”

“You noticed it too, huh?”

Amidst all of his broadly smiling and waving employees, Benno stands alone, staring at us, rubbing his temples and scowling.

Hmmm, knowing Benno, isn't that the same look he gives me whenever I do something really unnecessary? Did I somehow do something wrong again?

We draw closer and closer to the temple, and the details of the white building I'd been observing from far away slowly start to come into view. Reliefs have been carved along the walls, and on both sides of the entrance there are four statues carved of stone lined up. Whether these are statues of this city's gods or just ordinary decorations, I can't really say.

While my vision was occupied by the sight of the front of the procession starting to enter the temple, we'd started pass Freida's house. The guild

master and his family have all taken positions along the side of the street. I even see Ilse and Jutte there too.

“Congratulations, Maïne!”

“Thank you!”

The people I know call out to me, waving. I wave back at them, and yell back.

“Freida!”

The guild master has Freida in his arms, like my father is carrying me. She looks a little shocked as she smiles and waves back at me.

“Maïne, you look wonderful!” she yells. Amongst all of the cheering, I can just barely hear her.

Before the several stairs that lead into the temple, guardsmen stand, looking imposing. They wear blue clothing underneath what appear to be simple pieces of armor. I can see fine ornamentation on it, and it is polished to the point where it gleams in the light. Coupled with the fact that their clothing is glossy as well, it seems clear that even this is ceremonial.

The enormous double doors loom over us, towering taller than two grown men. Both the doors and the thick wooden gate they’re set into, are crafted expertly and carved intricately. The gates have been opened wide, and beyond them I can see a long white stone plaza stretching ahead. At the end of it is a large, five-story building, and to either side are smaller three-story buildings, all tied together by walkways. All three buildings are built from the same white stone, but only the one in the center has been decorated with carvings and reliefs.

“Well, this is as far as parents go. Lutz, take care of Maïne for me.”

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

My father sets me down. I take Lutz’s hand, and we walk, at the tail end of the procession, towards the enormous doors. As even the most loudly excited kids start to quiet down as soon as we pass through the doors, the

noise gradually starts to abate.

“Hey, Maïne.”

Lutz’s voice reverberates much more than I expected. I turn to look at him. “What?” I say, keeping my voice down, leaning in close as if I’m trying to hear a secret. Lutz keeps looking forward, but leans closer to my ear, and speaks in little more than a whisper.

“That dress and that hairpin really suit you. You’re shockingly cute.”

When everyone else praised me like that, I always just smiled back and thanked them as normal, but somehow, having this whispered into my right before entering a temple destroys my usual reaction.

“Um? Uh? Why, now...”

I instinctively look up at him, and see him smiling a genuine smile, as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“My brothers said it before I could back there, so I figured I should wait until they weren’t around.”

“Ah... oh... is that it? Then, thank you!”

I put one hand on my chest to try and still my leaping heart, and, holding hands, Lutz and I walk together into the temple.

Chapter 66: A Quiet Uproar

The shrill voices of the children who entered before us echo throughout the temple, ringing so loudly within the walls that I feel a headache coming on. I stop walking, unintentionally, and Lutz tugs gently on my hand, pulling me forward.

“Watch your step, there’s some stairs,” he says. “Okay,” I reply.

As I take a few steps forward, watching my step, I hear a heavy groaning sound from behind me as the doors start to close. Startled by the shadow suddenly passing beneath me, I turn around to see gray-robed priests pushing the doors shut.

“Ah, that’s right, we were the last ones through, so...”

When the doors are shut tight, a blue-robed priest slowly walks in front of it. He waves some sort of wind chime-like bell, attached to which is a strangely-colored stone. It jingles. In the next instant, the voices of the other children disappear, as do their echoes, leaving only the faintest ringing that quickly fades to silence.

“What was that...?”

Lutz’s voice doesn’t come out. Or, more accurately, nothing more than a whisper comes out. Judging by his facial expression and posture, I think he’d tried to speak in a normal tone of voice, louder than what actually came out. He looks shocked at how little sound he made, touching his throat.

“Maybe it’s a magical tool?” I say. “It happened as soon as that blue priest rang that bell.”

As I expected, my voice doesn’t come out any louder than a whisper either. However, since I’d seen the moment the priest rang the bell, I was able to figure out what had happened and stay calm. When I say this, Lutz relaxes, breathing a sigh of relief. Now that he knows it’s not just him, and that there was a reason for it, he calms himself down.

I sigh in admiration, then face forward again, looking along the long line

of the procession ahead of us. The interior of the temple is like an atrium, long and with a high ceiling. The walls on both sides of the room are covered in intricate carvings, and thick, round pillars are lined up regularly along them. Tall windows, stretching nearly four stories high, line the walls in even intervals, letting long, straight shafts of light into the room. Both the walls and the pillars are white, with the exception of gold ornamentation here and there, and even in the dim light they still seem bright. The only place rich with color is the far end of the room.

Unlike the Christian churches I'd seen in collections of photographs and art museums, there are no frescoes or stained glass windows. The white stone construction makes the room feel very unlike a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple, and the colors don't match any of the vibrant shades from southeast Asia.

On the innermost wall, a multicolored mosaic stretches from the floor all the way to the ceiling, bearing an intricate pattern. It glimmers where it's hit by sunlight from the side, reminding me just a little bit of a mosque for a moment, but there are stairs, too, over forty of them, going from the floor to nearly the height of the window. The stone statues that are arranged on the way up only reinforce how alien this all is.

Perhaps these stairs are meant to evoke the idea of climbing towards heaven and the gods? Something about the statues lined up at the top of the stairs remind me of the dolls we put out for Girls' Day, though...2

On the upper-most stair, there are two statues next to each other, one man and one woman. Based on how they're arranged, they give me the impression that they're a married pair. Between that and the fact that they're on the highest stair, I think they're probably the highest-ranked gods in this religion. Even though they're made of white stone, the male god is draped in a glittering black mantle set with countless golden stars, and the female goddess wears a golden crown, with long, tapered spines coming off of it like rays of light.

Perhaps this is the goddess of light and god of darkness? Or perhaps the goddess of the sun and the god of the night? Either way, the mantle and the crown stand out.

A few steps below that, there's a stone statue of a slightly plump, gentle-looking woman, holding a golden chalice that glitters with gemstones. Below her, there's a woman holding a staff, a man holding a spear, a woman holding a shield, and a man holding a sword. They're all made of the same white stone, but the fact that they're each holding just one brightly-colored item makes this even more mysterious to me. These statues were made to hold real things; is there some meaning to that?

Something like a Holy Grail or a Holy Sword, perhaps?

On the steps below that, there are flowers, fruits, bundles of cloth, and other offerings laid out. The more I look, the more it really does remind me of Girls' Day.

"Maïne, don't just stand and stare, keep walking!"

"Hm? Oh! Sorry, sorry."

Lutz tugs me forward, and I hurry a little bit to keep up with the end of the procession. The path down the center of the room is clear so that we can walk though, but on either side thick red carpets are spread out, spaced about one meter apart from each other.

At the front of the room, there are a number of desks, where a number of priests garbed in blue seem to be performing some sort of procedure. The children who finish going through that procedure are guided by gray-clothed priests to either side of the room. They're led to spots on the carpet, from the outside of the walls in, and told to take their shoes off before sitting down.

As the procession slowly makes its way forward, either something happens or Lutz notices something new. "Geh," he says, grimacing, as he looks ahead at whatever he's seeing.

"What's wrong, Lutz? Is something happening at the front?"

"...Ahh..."

After waffling for a moment, as if he's trying to figure out how to say something difficult, he lets out a defeated sigh, then looks over at me.

“It’s a blood seal, like you hate.”

“Wh... what?” “Some kind of magical tool, I think. Everyone’s thumbs are getting pricked and they’re pushing their blood onto it.”

I’d much rather I hadn’t heard that, but now there’s nothing left for me to do but do a sharp about-face and immediately get right out of there. Lutz, however, grabs my hand tightly and refuses to let me go.

“Give up,” he says. “This looks like some sort of registration thing. I’d bet this is related to that citizenship thing, right?”

“Urgh... yeah, you’re right. I think that’s probably it.”

Otto and Benno had both told me that after my baptismal ceremony was over, I’d be acknowledged as a resident of this town and granted citizenship rights. In other words, if I can’t get through this ritual, no matter how bad it may be, then I can’t get my citizenship.

“...Why do magical tools like blood so much?” I ask. “Dunno,” he replies.

Every single time I have to use a magic tool, it involves cutting open my finger and making blood on it. No matter how many times I do it, I’ll never be able to get used to the pain of it. When I look ahead to see what the other children are going through, I see brusque blue-robed priests jabbing their fingers with needles, then pushing those fingers firmly into what look like medallions of flat white stone. Those kids have their mouths open in what look like screams of pain, but I can’t hear anything coming from them at all. Seeing them clutching their sore fingers while being lead away towards the carpets has me trembling in fear.

“Next please, this way,” says a priest.

The line of people in front of me has thinned out, and a voice calls out from one of the empty desks. Lutz pushes me forward, and I start heading towards where I’m being called. The blue-robed priest smiles at me a little, looking me up and down, and then holds out his hand.

“Please hold out your hand, palm up. I’m going to prick your finger, but it’ll only hurt a little bit.”

Of course, the thing he said wouldn't hurt does, in fact, hurt. The instant the needle pricks my finger, I feel a sharp pain, like being poked by something very hot, and a fat, red drop of blood wells up on my fingertip. Between the pain and seeing my blood, I can feel myself going deathly pale.

"Smear that blood on here, if you would."

Unlike the priest I'd seen earlier, who'd been roughly forcing kids' fingers into place, this priest just guides my hand over to a small medallion-like object. It seems like just gently smearing my blood onto its surface was good enough, leaving me relieved that the process wasn't nearly as painful as I thought it would be.

I'm glad that this priest wasn't anywhere near as violent, but my finger still really stings!

I wonder, had that magical tool that had been used to quiet us down not actually been used to stop our chattering from resounding through the temple, but to stop our screams of agony?

"You two are the last ones through. This way, please."

We're called over by a gray-robed priest who, despite being an adult, seems to still have a little immaturity left in him. Lutz and I start walking towards the carpet. After being instructed to take off our shoes, we do so, and then sit down on the carpet. Amongst all of the kids who are either sitting cross-legged or with their feet splayed out in front of them, I'm the only one sitting with my legs propped up, like I'm back in PE class in elementary school³. Being in such a wide-open, gymnasium-like space, surrounded by other children my age, makes me feel like this is the only correct way to be sitting.

"Maïne, why're you curled into a ball like that?"

"It's not a ball, it's a triangle," I explain. "It's called triangular sitting."
"Huh? A triangle? Where?" "Like this," I say, gesturing.

As the two of us chat, the blue-robed priests, having finished registering everyone, collectively step back behind the desks. After they carry all of

the boxes that they had been putting our registration medallions in out of the room, the gray-robed priests burst into action, bustling about as they start getting ready for the next phase. They carry out the desks, and in its place they bring out a much more extravagant altar and place it in front of the steps.

The blue-robed priests come back into the room, lining themselves up on either side of the altar, and at roughly the same time the gray-robed priests line up along the walls where we're sitting, seemingly finished with their preparation work. The way they're standing behind us reminds me of teachers keeping watch over students at a school assembly, and I take extra care to make sure I'm sitting up properly in my triangle.

"The head priest enters," intone the blue-robed priests, waving the rods they're holding. The sound of countless bells rings out, and an old man, dressed in white robes with a golden sash crossing his shoulder, slowly enters the room, carrying something. With careful, deliberate footsteps, he makes his way to the altar, upon which he gently sets the thing he was carrying.

Is... that... a book?!

I rub frantically at my eyes in disbelief, looking again and again to make sure that my eyes aren't deceiving me. When I see the head priest start to slowly turn the pages, I'm convinced. That is, beyond the shadow of any doubt, a book. It feels like a bible, or some other form of holy scriptures.

"Lutz, a book! That's a book!"

I poke him excitedly on the shoulder. He had been fidgeting constantly, unused to sitting on the ground. He cranes his neck to see.

"Where? Where do you see it?"

"Look, there, the thing the head priest is holding. That!"

It looks like it is bound in leather, and the easily-damaged corners are reinforced with finely-worked gold. I can see from here that it's studded with small gemstones, as well.

"That's a book? Whoa, that looks expensive. That's nothing like the one

that you've been making."

"There's not a whole lot in common between a book like that, which has a lot of artistic value, and what I'm making, which is mostly practical. It's like comparing the sword that that statue is carrying to your knife." "Ahh, I see. Even so, aren't you surprised to see something like that here?" "...I'm not surprised at all, actually. If you think about it, it's actually pretty obvious."

As an ordinary Japanese woman with no particularly strong interest in religion, I'd never even considered going near the temple, but in a religious institution like this, there would of course be some way to collect all of the scripture, holy texts, bibles, and various teachings in one place. There would be books. Even if my body doesn't let me move the way I want, even if I didn't have any money, even if I didn't desperately try to make them myself, books definitely exist.

If the merchant's guild is on the cutting edge of gathering information, then the temple must be on the cutting edge of theology, mathematics, music, arts, and all of the other fields of study that could bring them closer to the gods. The Christian church had fostered scholarship like that, and in Japan Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines had been places where people gathered to learn from leading intellectuals.

"Aaaaaargh, I should have come here earlier! Why didn't I think of this?! I'm such an idiot! I could have been reading books without going through all this trouble!!"

It's probably for the best that my voice isn't getting any louder no matter how much I scream. As I cry out from deep in my heart, Lutz looks at me in amazement, then just shrugs his shoulders.

"So, it looks like you've completely forgotten, but they don't let kids who haven't gone through their baptismal ceremonies into the temple, you know? Even if you'd thought of it right away and come here, the gatekeepers wouldn't have let you in."

Now that he mentions it, he's right. The only children who can enter the temple are those who've already been baptized.

“But, to just happen to go to the temple and come across a book on the day of my own baptismal ceremony, couldn’t that be fate?”

“Everybody goes to the temple when they turn seven, Maïne. Fate has nothing to do with it.” “Ugh, Lutz! Stop picking everything apart like that!” “I know you’re excited about there being a book here, but calm down. It’ll be a big problem if you pass out here.”

Lutz seems to think I’m a little too excited and is trying to calm me down.

“Huh? But, there’s a book so close. Not getting even a little bit excited is completely impossible, you know?”

“Even if it’s impossible, you have to. I mean, that’s not a book that they’d ever let you read, right?” “Ah... that’s right.”

Even though there’s a book, it’s not a book that I can ever touch. There’s no way that I’d ever be allowed to read a book wrapped in leather and studded with gemstones. As soon as I realize this, my excitement quickly dissipates, and my head drops dejectedly.

“Today, you are all now seven years old, and you have been recognized as citizens of this town. Congratulations.”

Although the head priest seems quite old, he still has a powerful voice that reverberates through the temple. After opening with his congratulations, he then proceeds to start reading aloud from the book in his clear voice. It sounds like some sort of scriptures. I, with my entire heart seized firmly by the book, lean forward in anticipation.

The contents of the scriptures are similar to what Benno had told me a while ago, about the creation of the world and the changing of the seasons. The priest is reciting it in simpler words that are easy for children to understand.

“For a long, long time, so long that we can’t even imagine it, the god of darkness lived in total solitude.”

After that, he met the goddess of the sun, a bunch of things happened, they got married, had many children—among them, the goddess of water,

the god of fire, the goddess of wind, and the god of earth—, and created the world we live in, or so the story goes. The “bunch of things happened” part seems like it was abbreviated for our sakes, but it sounds very soap-opera-like to me.

Myths are like that, though. All of the myths I know are all chaotic like that. Now’s not the time for snark.

Just hearing a new story is already fun, but comparing it to the other myths I already know while I only makes it even more interesting. Lutz, however, doesn’t seem to be interested, nor does he seem to know how this could possibly be fun. He rocks back and forth restlessly, looking enviously over at me.

“You look like you’re having fun,” he says. “Yeah, tons,” I reply. “What’s fun about it?”

“The beginning, the end, and all the bits in between!”

I answer him with an enormous smile. He looks at me, amazed, then sighs, shaking his head.

“...Alright. That’s good.”

“Yeah!”

After the creation myth came the story about the changing of the seasons. I’d already heard the basics of this from Benno: “Spring is the season of water, where the melting snow causes sprouts to grow. Summer is the season of fire, where the heat of the sun causes the leaves to unfurl. Fall is the season of wind, where the cooling air causes the fruits to ripen. Winter is the season of earth, when all life sleeps.” The actual myth itself, however, is different.

“The goddess of earth was the firstborn child of the goddess of the sun and the god of darkness. At that time, the god of life took one look at her and instantly fell in love and asked her father, the god of darkness, for her hand in marriage. The god of darkness thought that their marriage would bear many children and was pleased by this proposal, so he granted the god of life’s request at the two were married.”

So the myth of the season begins. Lutz, however, yawns, seeming to find this entire thing immensely tedious, so I think I'd rather explain it in digest form.

To put it simply, the god of life turned out to be more than a little bit crazy. He locked her in a prison of snow and ice and raped her until she got pregnant, and then even got jealous of the unborn children. Winter is the season of plunder and of nothing being born.

The goddess of the sun got worried that she hadn't seen the goddess of earth ever since she got married, so she melted the ice. The crazy god was worn out after having been able to copulate as much as he wanted, so the water goddess washed all of the snow and ice away, freeing her friend and sister. Spring is the season where the two of them worked together to help seeds, the earth goddess's children, sprout.

The god of fire then lent his power, making summer the season where the budding life grew to ripeness. However, after that, the crazy god regained his strength and started looking for the earth goddess. Fall is the season where the goddess of winds put all her power into making sure the crazy god couldn't get anywhere near her sister, while helping to ensure that the harvest is finished.

Then, when the brothers and sisters were finally exhausted, it was the crazy god's turn. Once again, he locks up and rapes the earth goddess. Her siblings want to kill the crazy god even more, but if they do that, then no new life can ever be born, so they cannot. So, caught in this irreconcilable dilemma, the siblings are forced to wait through the winter, gathering their strength.

This back-and-forth forms the endless loop of the seasons, it seems. This is a myth that's as full of opportunities for snark as every other.

Incidentally, since the children here were born in the summer, our guardian deity is the zealous, hot-blooded god of the sun, and we have divine favor relating to guidance and rearing children. With that, the head priest concludes his talk of the gods and closes the book.

"Now then, I shall teach you how to worship the gods. If you offer your

prayers and gratitude to the gods, then they will surely grant you greater divine favor.”

He wears a very serious expression as he says this, slowly walking out from behind the altar. While he does this, gray-robed priests quickly unroll carpets in front of the blue-robed priests.

The head priest stands in the center of the room, with a line of ten blue-robed priests behind them.

“Now then, before you try it yourself, watch closely. ...We pray to the gods!”

As he says this, the head priest opens his arms out wide, raises his left knee high, and looks up towards the heavens.

“Snrk!”

I quickly clap a hand over my mouth, clamping down on my sudden outburst. It is absolutely not okay to spontaneously burst out laughing in the middle of a sacred temple. I am fully aware of this. However, no matter how much I may try to remind myself of this, I am filled with the undeniable urge to start laughing out loud. My stomach is seizing up.

I mean, that’s the Gl[]ico pose4! They’re doing the []ico pose! With a straight face! Why Gli[]?! You don’t need to lift your leg like that, right?! You’re an old man, you shouldn’t be standing on one leg like that! It’s dangerous!

I can keep myself from laughing too rudely here. This man is keeping himself perfectly balanced in such a crisp pose. I must just be fixating on the joke. I’m confident that no matter what else this man does, I’ll be able to bear it.

The head priest slowly places his foot on the ground and lowers his arms, looking like he’s doing Tai Chi. If that had been all, I would have been able to keep myself under control, but does this old man have some sort of grudge against my aching sides?

“We give thanks to the gods!”

With elegant movements, like flowing water, the head priest transitions from the Gl[]co pose to the dogeza, getting on his hands and knees and pressing his forehead into the floor. Seeing this is too much to bear. A strange noise bursts out of my mouth.

“Beheh!”

“Maïne, what’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?” “I’m f... fine! ...I’m still fine. I can do this. This is just how people worship the gods around here, after all.”

I clamp my mouth shut, burying my face in my knees. Lutz looks at me with concern. Even if I try to tell him that I’m finding these worship poses hilarious, even if I try to explain the joke, there’s no way he’d understand. Nobody who didn’t already know about the Gl[]co pose would understand these waves of laughter.

This is their religion. This is their religion. They are doing this in earnest, laughing is rude.

I remember the image of opening the classroom door and walking in on a Muslim classmate praying to Allah, and I gradually manage to soothe my cramping stomach. To an outsider, a religions prayer practices can look strange. I’m only laughing because I wasn’t expecting a Gl[]co pose out of nowhere, that’s all. Laughing is bad.

I take several long, slow breaths, then, when I’m confident that I can keep my face under control, raise my head. As I do that, the head priest encourages us all to stand.

“Now, then, please rise. Let us do this together.”

Together! Together, he says! Please, have mercy!

Everyone around me stands up. I do so as well, but I feel the corners of my mouth squirming and my stomach twitching, the harbingers of an enormous laughing fit. No matter how much I’m telling myself over and over that laughing is bad and that laughing is bad, the urge to laugh is only growing stronger.

“We pray to the gods!”

The head priest intones this, raising himself into the Gl[]co pose. This is fine. This is the second time I'm seeing this, so this isn't shocking. I have successfully weathered this crashing wave of laughter. This is a victory for my abdominal muscles.

In the next instant, the blue-robed priests, in perfect unison, lift their arms and legs.

"We pray to the gods!"

Seeing ten priests, standing in a row, with perfectly straight faces, doing the Gl[]co pose is too much. My sides give out. The angle of their hands, the height of their legs, the seriousness of their faces are all perfectly identical. I can't keep myself upright anymore. My legs give out and I crumple to the floor.

"Ngh! ...Mmph... nggeh..."

My stomach! Someone, save me!

Even though I'm still somehow able to keep my mouth shut, tears are welling up in my eyes, and snorts of laughter are still leaking out. If I could just roll around on the carpet, smacking the floor as I laugh my guts out, I know I'd get over this immediately, but being denied like this is only making my laughter stronger.

"Maïne, you really weren't okay after all!"

When I look up at Lutz, I see him looking down at me with concern as he holds the Gl[]co pose, balancing unsteadily on one foot. He has delivered my finishing blow. I start smacking the carpet, unable to contain myself.

"I'm sor... geheh... I can't... breathe..."

"Maïne! Why didn't you say something earlier?!" "Th... that's not it... I'm... heh... I'm fine..."

Lutz crouches down next to me, frantically waving his hand. A gray-robed priest rushes over, looking like he's seeing a disaster unfold.

"You two, what's wrong?"

“Umm, it looks like Maïne isn’t feeling well, so she suddenly collapsed. She’s already pretty weak and has a fragile constitution, so since she got too excited by the ceremony...”

Well, I certainly did get excited, but I’m not particularly feeling unwell. This is an ordinary laughing fit. There was no need to call over a priest.

“I’m... I’m fine! I’ll be okay in a moment! Look!”

I frantically try to stand up, but unfortunately, whether it’s because my body wasn’t expecting such a sudden movement or because I’m oxygen-deprived after laughing so much, I completely fail to put any strength in my arms and fall flat on my face in front of Lutz and the priest.

“As if you’re fine! What about this looks like you’re fine!”

“Urgh, that was just a mistake... I’m really okay, you know?”

Saying that while I’m still collapsed on the floor can’t possibly be convincing at all. Even if I’m fully aware that I’m fine, if I were to step back and look at me from the outside, it is only natural that people would have a lot more faith in what Lutz is saying than what I am.

“I’ll bring you to the aid room,” says the priest, not believing me in the slightest. “You can rest there until the ceremony is over.” He picks me up, and I don’t have the strength within me to resist.

Due to my aching sides, I retire from the baptismal ceremony. It seems like this will become the kind of bitter memory I can tell absolutely nobody else about.

Chapter 67: Forbidden Paradise

The room the gray-robed priest brings me to is not the sort of room that would be used to give aid to poor people. No, this room is for lodging. On top of that, based on how clean it is and how much care has been put into the interior design, if I were to compare it to the waiting rooms at the gate then it would definitely remind me more of the room set aside for the rich, the merchants, and those bearing letters of referral from the nobility.

I wonder if it's because of this dress...

Based on how much cloth is used in a garment, and how lavishly and colorfully it's been embroidered, it's possible to roughly guess how much money its wearer's household makes. Compared to my normal clothing, today's dress is unusually fluffy and frilly. Its embroidery isn't just limited to the hems, and tiny lace flowers have been sewn onto it. It's extravagant. My hairpin is a custom design too, so at first glance, I think I probably look like I was rich enough to be on Freida's level.

But... I don't need to expressly point out that I'm actually from a poor family, do I? The priest is the one who arbitrarily decided this, and if he were to change his mind then I have no idea what kind of treatment I'd actually get. Aren't I always being told not to be so naïvely honest about everything?

"Pardon me."

As I frown, thinking to myself, the gray-robed priest gently sits me down on a couch. I feel like I'm about to fall over, so I reach for the armrest to steady myself. At about that time, the priest gently removes my hairpin and, with careful movements, removes my shoes as well.

Uh?!

I'm shocked by how spontaneously and naturally this treatment is coming. This reminds me of how in Freida's house Jutte was constantly stepping in to assist with nearly everything. This gray-robed priest is clearly accustomed to taking care of people. My eyes grow wider and I completely forget to even try to politely decline as he stands up, gets a bed

ready, and carries me like a princess over to it.

“...Ah, um, I’m really doing fine!”

“It isn’t good to lie before the gods. You’re in a temple, you know.”

It’s not a lie, though...

He lays me down on the bed, then politely covers me with the blanket. Then, he places my hairpin at the bedside, and arranges my shoes at the foot of the bed. Instead of a priest, this man seems to be an incredibly skilled personal attendant. This is making me more than a little uncomfortable.

“Rest here,” he says. “I’ll check in on you later.”

“...Okay.”

The priest leaves the room, closing the door behind him with a clack. It’s true that I can’t really move my body with any real power behind it, so I’ll wait here for now, recovering my strength.

My family will undoubtedly want to know why I collapsed, but I can’t actually tell them that it’s because I was laughing too hard. Lutz, who’d been so worried, would definitely get mad if he heard that, too. As soon as I think that, the image of Lutz doing the Gl[]co flashes through my mind, and I snort with laughter.

I lay there idly for a while, and my strength comes back. I clench and unclench my fist to make sure of it.

Now then, what to do? I vaguely need to go powder my nose.¹

There’s a chamber pot right next to the bed, but since I don’t know where to get water, cleaning up my mess afterwards would be problematic. The kinds of people who usually stay here probably bring servants with them so they don’t have to deal with that themselves, but I don’t have anything like that. There’s also no way I can ask that priest, who I just met, to clean up after me. At the very least, I want to find someone to ask where I can get water, then find a way to sneakily take care of my own business.

I slowly pull myself upright, and experimentally wave my arms and legs. It looks like I'm better to the point that I'm not going to suddenly pass out again. I use my hairpin, left at my bedside, to do up my hair. At Freida's house, there was a bell at the bedside to call for someone, but there isn't one here.

This is a state of emergency. Let's go search for someone.

I have no idea how long it will actually take to find someone, so I'd rather get started on this before things get really desperate. I climb down off of the bed, put on my shoes, and slip out of the room.

Even though the walls are occasionally decorated with pillars, carvings, and reliefs, the corridors that stretch on ahead of me are made primarily out of white stone. The clicking of my shoes against the stone echoes off of the smooth walls, but I can't hear anyone else's footsteps, nor do I see any other trace of human presence. For now, I'll start heading back towards the place where the baptismal ceremony was being held.

...Hm? Did I take a wrong turn somewhere?

Despite how white the temple is, I'm starting to see splashes of color here and there. The carvings and statues have gradually become more refined and elegant, to the point where I'm sure I'm not imagining how extravagant they've become. I think I've gotten myself close to where the nobility come and go.

The blood instantly drains from my face. If a noble spots me, I'll get interrogated, and things will get really, really difficult for me.

Not good. I need to turn around, right now!

I spin on my heels, then, almost trembling in fear, quickly walk back the way I came. I want to get out of the nobles' zone as fast as I can. To make sure I don't get lost on my way back, I try to find recognizable landmarks as I walk.

I've seen that carving before, right? And I remember that cloth there, too...

As I search for the turn that'll take me back to the lodging room, I hear

the click of another person's footsteps drawing closer. If I had already managed to make it out of the noble's zone, I'd be whole-heartedly thrilled about this, but right now I don't want to be seen. I need to hide. If it's a priest, then that's probably fine, but I'm scared of it being a noble. I frantically look around, but there's nowhere I can hide in this hallway. I stand out plainly, and am spotted right away.

"Who's there?! What are you doing here?!"

The strict voice comes from a priestess, whose hair is done up very neatly. Her appearance is very neat and businesslike, but for some reason she also gives off the impression of being a sexy private secretary. The priestly robes she wears are the same gray color as those of the priest who had carried me in, although the design is different. Whether that's because priests and priestesses dress differently or because there are special ceremonial robes, I don't know. Come to think of it, there weren't any priestesses at the ceremony, were there?

I breathe a sigh of relief that this woman isn't a noble, then immediately start apologizing for stepping into the nobles' zone.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am. My name is Maïne. I collapsed in the middle of the baptismal ceremony and was lent a room to rest in. I don't have an attendant with me, and there was no bell to call for anyone, so I went to see if I could find someone. I unfortunately got lost, and when I noticed that, I'd found myself here..."

The woman stares at me, looking me over from head to toe, then sighs resignedly. She taps her cheek, inhaling a long, weary breath, but doesn't take her eyes off me.

"I have business that I'm in the middle of, but afterwards I'll show you to the hall of worship where the baptismal ceremony is being held. Do you mind waiting a little?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you very much."

The priestess, her eyes slightly narrowed, sets off, the clacking of her brisk footsteps echoing through the halls. I follow along at a half jog, trying to keep up. If we have too far to go, I'm probably going to pass out.

“Wait here, please. I need to finish my business here.”

However, thanks to the fact that this priestess only needed to go about another room down, I happily manage to not collapse along the way.

“Hah, haahhh...”

I nod, sucking in air as I try to catch my breath. The priestess looks down at me with a slightly worried frown, then pushes the door open with a creak. I put my hand on the wall to steady myself, then look through the door into which the priestess had casually passed through. When I see what’s inside, my breath stops entirely.

“...?! Is... that... a library?”

It’s not a particularly large room, but the walls are lined with bookshelves. With a quick glance, what I can see on them are mostly stacks of papers and wooden boards, but there are shelves hidden behind closed, locked cabinet doors, and I can easily imagine that that’s where the valuable books are kept.

In the center of the room sit two long desks facing each other, their surfaces tilted up at a diagonal as if to make reading easier. The length reminds me of the long, connected desks in university lecture halls. They look long enough that five people could sit side by side at them.

Also, attached to the desks at rough intervals are six thick, sturdy chains. The ends of each of these is fastened to six massive books, which are lined up on the desks.

“...It’s a ‘chained library’...”

Visiting historical libraries in foreign countries had been one of my dreams when I was Urano. Sure, this is an alternate universe and not a foreign country, and this is a temple’s library, but even still, can I count this as a dream come true? A foreign library, locked bookshelves, books chained to tables, books that you could feel the history of the library through, no matter which you read... this is something that I could have never practically managed to see back then.

The hand I put on my chest to calm myself down quivers. My heart is

pounding like an alarm, and I can feel how powerfully the blood is rushing through my veins. The things I've wanted for so very, very long are miraculously right before my eyes... eyes from which hot tears of joy are falling, one after another.

"I've... I've never seen this before..."

This is my first chained library, but, more importantly, this is the first time since I came to this world that I've seen enough books in one place for a room to be properly called a library at all. It's not all that large of a room, but to me, having lived my life without having ever found a single book, this is a veritable treasury of happiness.

Perhaps this library is a paradise made by the gods themselves. My god is here for me!

"We pray to the gods! We give thanks to the gods!"

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Deeply moved by finding this library, no, this chained library, I make the Gl[]co pose, then drop into a dogeza, lifting my thanks to the heavens. I'm a little wobbly when I do it, but I hope that both my emotions and my gratitude were properly conveyed.

I quickly scrub my face and hands on my clothing, checking over and over to make sure they're not the slightest bit dirty. After verifying that my hands are spotless, I turn to follow the priestess, and with a triumphant stride, step forth into this glorious paradise.

"Pardon my intrusMPH?!"

My face smacks into something, like I'd just walked into a sliding door that hadn't yet opened. Since I'd slammed into it so forcefully, stars dance before my eyes.

"Owww..."

I sit there on the ground, rubbing my head with one hand. With my other hand, I reach out towards the door. After a certain point, I can't move my hand any further. It seems that there really is some kind of invisible wall there. I try hitting it a couple of times, but there's no sign of

it opening.

“Huh? Wh... why?”

The priestess had walked in normally with no issue. I have no idea why only I would be rejected like this. The world before my eyes grows a little darker, and I start pounding on the invisible wall. It doesn't budge an inch.

Paradise is before my very eyes, yet I cannot enter. I can see so many books right in front of me, yet I cannot touch them. Is it okay for such a cruel torture to exist? To come so far and then be denied? You asshole gods! Give me back my gratitude!

“Nooo, let me in!! Let me in tooo!”

Books are so valuable that, practically, only the nobility have access to them. The temple used a magical tool to quiet children down during the baptismal ceremony, so it's not unreasonable to think there's some gimmick protecting these precious books. I know that, but this is just too much. Caught in the grip of this despair at being able to see, but not enter this room, I collapse in an undignified heap, unable to even wipe away the tears spilling from my face.

“I just want to read...”

The priestess, finished with her business, exits the room carrying a bundle of papers that look like some sort of documents. She looks down on me as I sit on the floor, leaning against the invisible wall, and crying my eyes out, and takes a startled step back.

“What are... you doing...?”

“Waaaaaah!! Why, why can't I go in?”

I smash my fists weakly into the invisible wall, the priestess looks back behind her, into the library room. “Ah,” she says.

“There's very valuable books in there, so only people authorized by the temple are able to enter.”

Her words give me a sudden flash of hope. If only people authorized by the temple are able to enter, then I should get that authorization. The gods

have not abandoned me yet. I quickly rub the tears and snot from my face, then shoot my hand straight up into the air.

“Question! How might I become authorized by the temple?”

“...The simplest way would be to become a sister-in-training, wouldn't it?”

It seems that apprentice priestesses are called sisters-in-training. In that case, since this woman is grown, she'd be referred to as a sister.

“Then, I'll become a sister-in-training! How do I do that?”

“You'd need to talk to the head priest or the temple master. Now then, let's go to the hall of worship.”

She looks like she thinks the conversation's finished, but I shake my head vigorously.

“Where might the temple master be?”

“His part in the baptismal ceremony is over by now, so he'll most likely be in his chambers, but... you want to go now?”

She's quite clearly trying to push me away, but I'm not going to let this source of valuable information out of my grasp.

“Yes, ma'am! I can't go home until I do!”

“...Let's go ask the temple master, then.”

I don't know if it's because she understands my deep conviction or if it's because she's judging how to treat me based on my clothing, but she sighs resignedly, then brings me to the temple master's chambers.

It seems like I managed to get entirely lost inside the temple, because the temple master's chambers are very close by. I'm left outside a magnificent wooden door as the priestess gets permission to enter. Looking around, I see all sorts of expensive-looking ornaments and paintings. The higher-ups of this religion must be very rich.

“An applicant?”

Through the crack left in the door, I hear the temple master and the

priestess conversing. Tension wells up in me at the realization that this is about to be a job interview. Making sure I'm hidden behind the door, I quickly check to make sure my appearance is in order. The one spot on my dress that had gotten wet from tears and snot has dried, although it's a bit stiff.

"Yes, a girl who came here for today's baptismal ceremony."

"Hmm, perhaps I should meet her." "Please go in," says the priestess to me.

I try to enter the room quickly and professionally, but the door is far heavier than I thought it was going to be. With no other choice, I throw my weight behind it, pushing the door open with all my strength, and then slip through the gap as soon as it's big enough.

"Pardon my intrusion," I say.

The temple master's chambers very much resemble Freida's room. In the center of the room, close to the door, there is something of a reception area, with a table and a few chairs in the center. On the very far wall of the room is a bed with a thick canopy, and in the opposite corner there's a place for doing work. The workspace has a thick desk and two bookshelves. On a display shelf sit thirty-centimeter-tall statues of the gods, the scriptures I saw a little while ago during the ceremony, and candles, arranged symmetrically so that the scriptures are in the center.

The temple master and the priestess are at that work space, so I approach them, minding my posture. He's fixing me with an almost painfully hard stare as I approach. I take a slow breath and ready all of my determination. This is a job interview. The job interview that will decide whether or not I can ever enter that library.

"Your name?"

"Maïne, sir," I say. I clasp my hands in front of my chest. "If at all possible, I would like to become a sister-in-training here. I would very much appreciate your consideration." The temple master gives me a slightly amused smile, then puts down his pen. "Well then, Maïne. Why don't I start by asking you why you think you'd want to become a sister-in-

training?” “Because there’s a library here, sir.”

The temple master’s eyes widen slightly, perhaps because my answer was so completely unexpected.

“...The library? You can read?”

“Yes, sir, although there’s a lot of difficult words I still don’t know. If I can read a book, I’ll learn more words. That’s why, for as long as I live, I’d like to thoroughly read all of the books here.”

The temple master rubs at his forehead, sighing. His shoulders drop so much that it looks almost forced, and he shakes his head.

“I think you might be misunderstanding something. A temple is where one prays to the gods. The priests and priestesses here are servants of the gods.”

“Of course,” I reply. “I’m well aware of that. But, wasn’t that thick book of scriptures you read to us at today’s ceremony written about the gods? To me, those scriptures are as the gods themselves. I wish to read everything about the gods. I would like to learn everything about the gods, sir.” “Are you a scriptural fundamentalist?”

A sharp gleam enters the temple master’s eyes. I have no idea whether or not I should say yes or no to that question. It’s a little troubling, but I can’t imagine that that’s a phrase any of the other kids I attended the baptismal ceremony with would have known. Rather than risk saying anything unnecessary, I think it would be best if I just tell him that I don’t know.

“I’ve never heard those words before, so I don’t know what they mean, but there isn’t a shred of doubt in my heart: I want to read the scriptures and learn about the gods. Please, believe in the passion that the god of fire has blessed me with. I truly hope and pray that I can become a sister-in-training, read all of the books here, and learn about the gods. How can I convince you of this?”

He looks a little taken aback when I press him for an answer, but he looks me up and down, hums contemplatively to himself, and then nods.

“I’m already convinced of your passion. If that is indeed your wish, then you certainly should become a sister-in-training.”

“Really?!” “However, if a child of a family such as yours wishes to join the church, they must make a donation that matches that level of passion. Do you know how much that is?”

It appears that, since my clothing implies I have a lot of money, this man is going to try to take advantage of me. “If you want to join, pay up,” he seems to be saying. I’m already fully aware that a religion such as this can’t be exclusively made of nice ideals. All he’s asking is that, if I want to join, how much money can I comfortably offer him in exchange?

Now that I think of it, I’ve heard that to buy a single book, you need to spend several small gold coins. If I were to gain access to that chained library, then I’d have access to at least ten of those bulky books. I don’t have any basis for this besides rental libraries in Japan, but in those libraries, you pay about as much as a book in order to be able to read all of the books in the library. Then, if you add to that all of the documents on the shelves as well as the ability to read as much as I want before I die, and then set aside the money I’ve been saving for my family... one large gold coin shouldn’t be a problem.

“I don’t know what the actual price of a donation is, but... if I think about the amount of money I have available to me, I could spend up to one large gold coin.”

“L... large?!”, the temple master shouts, spittle flying from his mouth.

The priestess, as well, claps her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. Judging by their reactions, I’m fairly confident that I presented them with an excessively huge sum of money.

“Huh? Is that too much? But, that’s just the absolute maximum, so I can pay less, you know?”

The temple master exchanges a look with the priestess, then clears his throat, as if to smooth over that outburst. He leans forward, looking at me seriously.

“Ahh... well, although I am overjoyed that a girl such as yourself burns with enough passion that she’d be willing to go that far to join our temple as a sister-in-training, by the time the baptismal ceremony comes around, you have already decided where you’d like to work, correct? Aren’t you already a member of something else?”

Of course, if I were to already have a place of employment picked out, suddenly becoming a sister-in-training wouldn’t be feasible. However, I’d been planning on working out of my home, so I don’t actually have a workplace to leave.

“I’m already provisionally registered with the merchants’ guild, but I don’t yet have a job. My body is very frail, so I was planning on working from home.”

“Working from home? A daughter of merchants? If you were to become a sister-in-training, you’d have to sever any links you have with other organizations. What would your parents say if you were to withdraw from the merchants’ guild and become a sister-in-training?” “I’ll have to talk this over with my parents, but...”

I trail off. I can’t immediately answer about the merchants’ guild. I’m probably going to need to still be in it if I’m going to continue buying and selling things.

“I wonder if I can even withdraw from the merchants’ guild at all? What would happen to all of the money I’ve made so far, and all of the products I’m going to be developing in the future?”

As I wonder aloud, trying to gather my thoughts, the temple master, overhearing, widens his eyes a bit, looking like he has a question to ask.

“The money you’ve made? The products? Are you not just helping out with your parents’ work?”

“No, sir.”

This is my chance to show how uniquely appealing it would be for me to join the temple. Recalling the list of important things to cover in a job interview, I explain to him all of the things I’ve tried so hard to do, and all

of the ways I've learned from my experiences. In brief.

"...Hm," he says, "if you're not registered with the guild so that you could help with your parents' business, then perhaps instead of having you withdraw your registration, you could simply join us here. I might need to consult with the guild master, though."

He smiles at me admiringly, as if that's exactly the answer he needed to hear. If he could talk with the higher-ups in the merchants' guild for me, that would be a huge lifesaver. I thank him politely, entrusting the negotiations with the guild master to him.

"First, I do need to consult my parents," I say. "Well, if your parents object or if there are any other issues, then please come talk with me right away. If what you're after is reading books, then please, come here, to this room. You wouldn't be able to enter the library, but I would be happy to let you read the scriptures I have here."

"Really?! Thank you so much! Prayers to the gods!"

The instant I leap up into the Gl[]co pose, I can feel my body start to lazily tilt to the side, and all the blood starts to drain from my face.

I overdid it again, didn't I.

Since Lutz isn't here, there's nobody to stop me from getting overexcited or running around recklessly. It seems like I, having paid no attention at all to my own behavior, have pushed my body past its maximum limit, and it's rebelling by cutting me off from all of my strength.

"...Oh, not again..."

With a thump, I fall to the ground and can't get up. I'm very thankful that this time I'm still conscious, even if I can't move my body. As I lay there, I focus all of my mental energy at the blob of devouring fever within me, even though there's not all that much of it at the moment.

"What's wrong?! What happened?!"

The temple master's eyes are wide with alarm as he watches me collapse and go still before his very eyes. He stands up with enough force to knock

his chair back. The priestess, dumbfounded, stares at me, and then murmurs to herself in a quiet voice.

“...Now that I think of it,” she says, tilting her head to the side, “didn’t she say she’d collapsed in the middle of the baptismal ceremony?”

“What?” says the temple chief, looking up at her.

Stuck here on the ground, I apologize to the two of them.

“I’m sorry, but I got a little overexcited. I can’t move at all right now, but please, just give me a minute.”

Chapter 68: Opposition and Persuasion

The temple master, having seen me collapse right in front of him, summons a gray-robed priest to carry me to the lodging room, and left a priestess to keep an eye on me so that I don't go wandering off again.

As a result, I wasn't able to sneak out to go use the restroom by myself, but had to rely on the priestess's help. Having to do my business while someone else watches is mortifying, and after being forced to ask the priestess for help cleaning up my waste I am so unbelievably embarrassed that I can't even look her in the eye any more. I want to pull the covers all the way over my head and writhe in utter shame, but I can't actually muster any strength to make my body do so.

While I lie limply on the bed, dejected about the things I can't do, the baptismal ceremony comes to an end, and Lutz comes in to check on me. When he sees how nice the room is, and notices that someone is here to keep an eye on me, his eyes go wide and he rushes up to my bedside.

"What did you do this time, Maïne?!"

"Ummm, I got lost looking for the restroom... and collapsed."

When I weakly lift my head from the pillow and give him very broad summary, he stares at me, unimpressed, then folds his arms and shakes his head.

"That can't be all, right? Tell me everything."

"Guh... Um, well, I found a library, and I got a little excited..."

Halfway through my sentence, Lutz squints, tilting his head.

"What's a 'library'?"

"An earthly paradise, crafted by the gods." "Huh?" "...A room with lots of books." "Ahh... Well, whatever. I get the gist of it either way."

He rubs his forehead, waving dismissively. Since he cut off my story, I start getting ready to go home, reaching for the hairpin placed at my bedside.

“You’re leaving out something important, aren’t you? This little princess collapsed after she went to appeal to the temple master.”

As I wind my hair up, the priestess, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, interrupts, shocked, then shrugs.

“What were you thinking, you idiot?!” says Lutz. “Sorry. I’m really thinking that I got a little too excited, though...”

Things would probably have gone better if I’d been a little more cool and collected, but it still turned out more-or-less all right. I accomplished my goal of laying the groundwork for becoming a priestess here, and the temple master will even let me go to his room to read the scriptures. I’m trying to properly reflect on my actions, but I don’t really have any regrets.

“We’re going home before you do anything else,” he says.

Lutz carries me on his back and, with the priestess’s guidance, leads us out of the temple. My father is nervously waiting for us in the plaza outside.

“...Looks like someone’s here for you,” says the priestess. “Well, this is as far as I go.”

“Thank you for all of the help,” I say.

And so, my father carries me on his back and takes me home. Along the way, Lutz gives my father a brief rundown of the day’s events. I leave it to him, as the swaying up here is lulling me to sleep.

“I’ve got to finish up my contract here at the shop,” says Lutz, “so I’ll head home after that.”

I snap back to my senses when I hear that, and see that we’re outside Benno’s shop. It’s clear that in my current condition I’m in no shape to visit Benno’s myself. Lutz is splitting off from us here, since he needs to deliver today’s report and to handle his apprenticeship contract.

Mark sees us from inside the shop and comes out to greet us. I wave at him from my spot on my father’s back.

“Thanks for earlier, Mister Mark,” I say. “I don’t think I can visit today,

but I'll come back later."

"Take care of yourself," he replies. "Lutz, good luck with the contract," I say. "Yeah! Go get some rest."

Lutz and Mark see us off with a wave, and my father and I head home together.

After a slightly extravagant celebratory dinner, as the family sits around drinking tea, I look at my father. I don't have much choice, I need to ask him about becoming a priestess.

"Hey, Daddy."

"What's up?"

He lifts his cup to his mouth and takes a sip.

"I want to go to the temple and become a sister-in-training, I think."

My father's smile vanishes in an instant.

In the next moment, he slams his cup down onto the table with an enormous bang. I flinch in sudden shock as the tea flies out of the cup, splashing all over the table.

"...Could you repeat that?" he says, in a low, threatening tone. "I must not have heard you correctly."

My eyes widen. The anger and disgust rolling off of him is so powerful that it sends shivers down my spine and makes my heart pound.

"...A priestess, at the temple."

"Don't be ridiculous! As if I'd ever let my daughter join the temple." "D... Daddy. Why are you so angry?"

I have no idea what on earth could have made him so suddenly angry, so all I can do is stare in bewilderment. I'd thought that there would be some opposition, but I hadn't even considered that the topic would cause my father to have this kind of furious outburst.

"Apprenticing as a priest or priestess is something that orphans do! If you don't have parents and don't have a patron, then that's your last

resort in order to survive. That's not for you, Maïne!"

"Only orphans... become priests?" "Yeah, that's right," says my father, suddenly looking helpless. "You've got parents, so it's not a job for you. Don't ask me again!"

I'm dumbfounded by my father's reaction. Then, something clicks, and I realize what he's saying. I think I might have been misled a bit by how the temple master had said that he hadn't expected there to be any applicants to become apprentice priestesses from someone "with a family like yours".

"Gunther," says my mother, "Maïne didn't know, there's no need to get so upset with her."

"...Yeah, you're right."

My father takes a long slow breath, as if to let out his irritation, then rustles my hair. My mother starts wiping up the splash of tea from the table, tilting her head curiously.

"But, either way, why in the world did you suddenly decide that you wanted to be a priestess?"

I can see from how my parents are talking that we have a different view on how we think about priests and priestesses. If I had to describe how I thought about priests and priestesses, I'd say that I thought they'd generally be pretty respectable, so this is a little surprising.

"So, um, after I collapsed at the baptismal ceremony, I went to look for the restroom and got really lost."

"You were in the aid room, right? Isn't there one right when you exit?"

My father, who'd gotten a simplified rundown of events from Lutz, cocks his head in puzzlement. Certainly, there do tend to be restrooms very near large rooms that commoners use.

I shake my head. "...Since my dress was so nice, they mistook me for some kind of rich girl, so I got brought to a different room, like the one where merchants with letters of recommendation from nobles go. So, there wasn't one nearby..."

“Aah, of course, if it was that dress.”

My father nods several times. My mother and Tuuli look pretty understanding as well.

“While I was looking, I kinda stumbled into a place that looked like it was used by the nobility...”

All the blood drains from my parents’ faces. In a society that’s as stratified as this one, we’re actually completely segregated from the nobility. If I were to stagger around, lost, and get caught by a noble, there’s a good chance that might be the end of my life right there.

“I was found by a priestess, so I didn’t meet a noble, but there was a library! There were so many books there. I really, really wanted to read them, so bad I couldn’t help it, but I couldn’t go in...”

“Books?” says my father, his eyebrow twitching. “When I asked if there was any way I could go in, she said that I could if I became a sister-in-training...” “And then you just decided you’d become a priestess without thinking about it?” He sighs. “Give up on those books. Just keep making them like you’ve been doing so far.” “Huh?”

I stare blankly at him, unable to believe that I was just told to give up on books. He stares back at me, completely serious, without a single trace of a smile on his face.

“If you had to choose between cutting all ties with your family and going to live in an orphanage so you could be a priestess and read books, or staying here with us like you’ve always done, what would you pick?”

He asks me to choose between books and my family, and my head goes blank. I want to stay with my family until the very end, before the devouring rots me away. I’ve been thinking that while I do that I’d make a few books and read those until I was satisfied. Today, however, I found a library, and was overjoyed that I might be able to read books, and got very excited, but I hadn’t even considered that I might get separated from my family.

“...Cutting ties... with my family?”

My shoulders shake, and my voice comes out weak and cracked. My father nods gravely.

“That’s right. Apprentice priestesses live in the temple. The work is hard, and the people you’d be working together with are all orphans. It’s not the kind of thing you could do since you have the devouring. You collapsed during the ceremony because you couldn’t manage your physical condition, so how do you expect to be able to work? Plus, books are extremely valuable. They’re rare enough that those people are protecting them using some sort of magical tool to make sure strangers can’t go into their library, right? Do you think that you’d be able to touch them as soon as you become an apprentice?”

Every single point he makes is a good one. I’ve got no room to refute any of it. The answer in my head is clear: becoming a priestess won’t work. However, I really don’t want to give up on all of those books that I’ve found. As I chew on my lip, feeling like I’m about to cry, Tuuli takes my hand. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and she squeezes my hand like she never wants to let go.

“You want to be a priestess? You promised me that you’d stay here with me, but you want to break your promise and go be a priestess?”

Tuuli’s words hit me like an arrow through my heart. Feeling like all the strength has left my body, I shake my head.

“...Nuh-uh. I was just trying to think of a way that I could read the books that were right in front of me. I didn’t really want to be a priestess at all.”

Apprenticing as a priestess is a means to an end, not the end itself. I don’t want to become one so badly that I’d make my entire family cry and leave them forever.

When I answer, Tuuli smiles brilliantly, but a sliver of anxiety still remains.

“I’m glad,” she says. “...You’ll stay here with me, right? Like we promised?”

“Yeah. ...When I’m feeling better, I’ll go see the temple master and tell

him no.”

When he hears my answer, my father suddenly breathes a huge sigh of relief, like he'd been holding his breath the entire time, and hugs me tightly.

“I'm so glad you understand. You're my precious daughter. Don't go off to the temple.”

While in my heart I really am happy that this ended without me making my family cry, the instant I close off my path towards that library, the devouring fever, of course, starts to spread through my body.

“Maïne, your temperature's going up, isn't it?” says my father. “Didn't you collapse several times today?” says my mother. “The stress of talking about this must have been the only thing keeping you going. Go rest already.”

I'm put to bed, and as I feel the devouring fever slowly spread through me, I gently close my eyes.

I didn't think I'd ever not be able to chose books.

Until now, there hadn't even been a “not books” option in me. Back in my Urano days, I probably would have immediately picked the books and leave my family behind. No matter what, books were foremost in my mind. Despite that, I'm not immediately choosing books. I'd been thinking that my family was the most important thing to me only in the absence of readily-available books, but at some point it looks like they've become just as important to me as books are.

But still, I finally found books, though. I really want to read them...

I'm not able to choose between my family and books, but there's no way I can just abandon books entirely. In this kind of mental state, even though I'm trying to contain my fever like I usually do, I can't really manage it as well as I usually do. It struggles with more force, as if sneering at me for being unable to cast off my lingering desires for that library. Irritated at how I can't make this fever move, I start trying to come up with a way that I can find some compromise between books and my

family.

Is there any way I can read those books without becoming a sister-in-training? Since the temple master's attitude changed after we started talking about donations, perhaps I could try saving a bit more, then throw money at them until they let me in? I'm not really the kind of person who likes slapping people around with money to get my way, but desperate times call for desperate measures, do they not? For now, if I could only go to the temple master's room and read the scriptures, that would be satisfying enough, wouldn't it?

It ultimately takes me about two days to shut away the devouring fever. When my temperature finally goes back down and I can finally get up, my body is still sluggish. The devouring fever's receded, so if I spend another day resting I should be recovered after that, I think.

Lutz comes to check on me, and when he sees my face gives me a difficult expression.

"You're still not looking too good. Master Benno said that he wanted to talk with you, but it looks like you can't do that today."

"Lutz, do you have plans tomorrow? I want to go to the temple, and then after that go to Mister Benno's shop; can you come with me?"

When I ask my question, Lutz tilts his head slightly to the side.

"The temple? Sure, but what do you need there?"

"To read the scriptures. ...Also, to tell them that I don't want to be a sister-in-training." "Huh?! An apprentice priestess? Where'd that come from?"

Come to think of it, although the priestess had said that I'd collapsed while making an appeal to the temple priestess, she hadn't said just what I was appealing to him for.

"I told you that I found a library during the baptismal ceremony, right? I was told that the only people who could go in were people connected to the temple, so I thought that I should get connected to the temple. I heard that being a sister-in-training was the simplest way to do that so I jumped

straight to that.”

“Isn’t that more reckless than me wanting to be a trader? Look at reality for once. Aren’t you the one who taught me not to leap straight ahead, but to look for a different path that’s actually possible?”

Hearing those words coming from Lutz, who’d gone from a boy just dreaming about a better life to a boy with his feet firmly on the ground as he chases after that dream, is pretty painful.

“...I wasn’t thinking about anything but the shortest route to reading those books.”

“Man, you don’t pay attention to anything else when books are involved. It’s okay to just not go back to the temple at all, right? Jumping between hope and despair isn’t good for your body. Doesn’t that make your devouring fever start going crazy?” “I was only able to get it under control this time by telling myself that I could at least go and read the scriptures,” I say.

He looks down at me, at a loss for words, then smiles wryly, patting me on the head.

“A compromise with yourself, huh? I didn’t think you’d ever back down when it came to books. Good job, that must have been hard. ...Well, if just going to the temple will make you feel better, then sure. I really think living there would be way too much for you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The next day, I head with Lutz over to the temple. I put on my new, nicer clothing, since we’ll be going to Benno’s shop afterwards. Also, since the area around temple master’s chambers is particularly nice, I don’t think it would be proper for me to show up in my usual attire.

I tell the temple gatekeeper my name, and that I’d like to meet with the temple master. It seems like they had already been told about me, because a gray-robed priest appears, ready to show me around the temple.

“What will you do, Lutz? Even if you came with me, you wouldn’t have anything to do, right? Maybe you could go to Mister Benno’s shop and

study? When I'm done with my business here, I can go to the shop too."

"I'll come pick you up at fifth bell, so wait here. Don't go wandering off by yourself, okay?" "Okay," I reply.

The gray-robed priest guides me through the temple to the temple master's chambers, but the temple master isn't there. Instead, the head priest, dressed in blue robes, is there to greet me. He's roughly the same age as my father, with pale blue hair that reaches down towards his shoulders. The temple master had been a dignified, slightly portly older man, but the head priest is fairly tall and slender. He looks like he's used to practical work involving organizing people and running about.

"Thank you very much," I say. "He's asked me to read the scriptures to you until he comes back."

It seems like the high priest is here to read aloud to me, but why would the high priest himself be here to entertain me? What did I do this time? ...Ah, the donation, huh?

Since I'm someone who can give them a lot of money, they're treating me with a lot of courtesy, I think. It seems like the amount of money I presented them with had a pretty significant impact. If that's the case, depending on how negotiations go, I might be able to open the way towards that library.

"Now then, please have a seat over there and listen."

We sit down at the table in the center of the room and he starts reading to me, but because I'm sitting across from him, all I can see is the book's cover. It seems like they won't let me touch the book. They're treating me with caution, not knowing what I might do or what I might be thinking.

"Um, Father. I don't want to just listen, I want to actually see the book."

"Why is that? Didn't you want to know the story of the gods?" "I do, but I also want to learn new vocabulary words as well."

From his face, it looks like my words struck a weak point. He thinks for a minute, then nods deeply.

“...Ah, I see. However, these are our very precious scriptures. Can you promise me that you absolutely won’t touch them?”

“I promise.”

The high priest lifts me up on his lap so that I can see the scriptures, then starts reading aloud. The pages of the book are yellowed around the edges from where they’ve been touched, and are covered with absolutely beautifully-inked calligraphy. I inhale a deep lungful of the scent of old paper, then let out a slow, appreciative sigh.

It seems that the story we had been told during the baptismal ceremony really had been significantly rephrased in much simpler vocabulary. It has a very different sound to it now. As the high priest reads to me, I start learning new vocabulary words. It’s fascinating to see all sorts of common nouns and verbs that I’ve been wondering how to spell for so long show up one right after another. I point out words that I recognize in the scriptures, careful not to touch the pages, and the high priest, looking amused, starts helping me with the rest.

“You’re a very quick learner! If you’re this good at absorbing knowledge, teaching you is very worthwhile. ...You aren’t nobility, are you? Perhaps one of your parents might have some noble blood in them?”

“Not in the slightest, I don’t think.” “Ah, a shame.”

I have no idea why the high priest would think that’s a shame. However, I get the feeling that the high priest might be like Mark, in charge of the education of the priests and priestesses. He seems very teacher-like, perhaps, and gives an impression that he’s very accustomed to teaching things to other people, much like Mark.

“Ahh, you’ve come?” says the temple master as he enters the room. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting.”

Now that the temple master has returned, the high priest tells me to return to my seat, and he carefully sets the book back on its shelf.

“Since Father Ferdinand was reading the scriptures to me,” I reply, “it was a very fun and worthwhile use of my time. Thank you very much for

your consideration.”

With slow, easy movements, the temple master moves to sit down in the chair the high priest had been sitting in, while the high priest stands to one side.

“Well then, what did your parents say?”

“They told me that only orphans become priestesses, so they scolded me and told me no.”

The high priest had been leaning towards me with anticipation gleaming in his eyes, but when I tell him this his shoulders droop dejectedly. He sighs, shaking his head. Next to him, the high priest opens his mouth to speak.

“It’s not entirely true that only orphans join the clergy. Noble children do so as well. It’s true that an orphan is very likely to become a priest or a priestess, but that’s because they can’t find another profession. The jobs that orphans can take are sharply limited, so they often have no choice but to become priests and priestesses.” I blink a few times. “Why can’t they find another profession?”

“They don’t have anyone to refer them to one, and they don’t have anyone to look after them.”

I can clearly understand this. The system of employment in this town is highly dependent on having a relative or a friend who can refer you to an apprenticeship, so it would of course be extremely difficult for an orphan. It’s already hard for people to find jobs besides the ones their parents can refer them to, so I can’t even imagine how hard it must be for an orphan, who can’t even find any connections.

“So, I’d like to be clear, it is possible for you to become a priestess without being an orphan.”

“I understand. However, my parents also told me that if I was an apprentice here I’d have to live in the temple, and the difficult work I’d have to do here would be far too stressful for my weak body.” “Do you mean that you weren’t simply feeling weak, but you are normally frail?”

The temple master frowns slightly, stroking his white mustache, and I realize that his face would make him look perfect in a Santa suit in the snow. I give him a big nod.

“That’s right. I have a disease called ‘the devouring’.”

“The devouring?!”

The slow, graceful temple master suddenly stands bolt upright, his eyes wide. The high priest, already standing, slams his hand into the table, leaning towards me excitedly.

“Did you say devouring?!”

“Y... yes. Is something wrong?”

The two of them have completely different expressions as they crowd their faces towards me, and I instinctively shrink back. I frown, wondering if I’ve somehow said something terrible, and the temple master slowly lifts a trembling finger towards the door.

“Father Ferdinand,” he says, “please bring the relic.”

“I know!”

The high priest nods slightly, then makes use of his long legs to briskly stride out of the room. He appeared so elegant at first glance, but he is amazingly quick. He seems in such a hurry that he leaves the door open behind him after he leaves. I stare at him, dumbfounded, as he leaves, but out of the corner of my eye, I see the temple master turn to the shelf the book of scriptures is resting on.

“We pray to the gods!”

He suddenly starts praying, rising into the Gl[]co pose. Caught in his rhythm, I reflexively raise my hands as well.

“We give thanks to the gods!”

Flowing like water, he sinks down into a dogeza, and I stare, dumbfounded, at his back. I tremble in fear, wondering what the hell is going on. I’m convinced that something terrible is clearly happening. I really want to run far away from here, but judging from their threatening

attitude a moment ago I can't imagine they'd let me escape so easily.

Frozen stiff in my chair, I slowly look away from the temple master, who continues to pray. From outside the door, I hear very rapid footsteps quickly growing louder, and the high priest bursts back into the room, carrying something wrapped in a bundle of cloth. He unwraps the cloth, revealing the chalice I'd seen during the baptismal ceremony, and gently sets it down on the table.

"Please, touch this chalice."

"Huh? It's really okay for me to touch this?" "Yes, quickly now!"

I timidly reach out for the chalice on the table. The two of them watch it closely, their eyes sparkling. The moment my fingertip reaches the chalice, it starts gleaming with dazzling light.

"Whoa?! What the heck?!"

I frantically yank my hand back, and the light gradually fades. As I look back and forth between my finger and the chalice, the temple master and head priest look at each other, then exchange nods.

"Maïne," says the temple master, "I'd like to speak with your parents."

Mother, Father, I'm sorry.

It seems something important just happened.

Chapter 69: Benno's Lecture

The temple master and the head priest look at me with gleaming eyes, and I falter. The head priest, perhaps noticing that my face has frozen up, goes to get the scriptures. While I wait for Lutz to come and pick me up, the head priest reads to me like before, letting me sit on his lap and teaching me various things. I'm happy about this, but there's a weird sort of tension in the air, and I very much would like to run as far away as possible.

Shortly after the fifth bell rings, a gray-robed priest enters the room. "A boy named Lutz is here for Maïne," he says. I breathe a sign of relief, having grown increasingly impatient as I waited for him.

"Lutz is here? I have to go, then. Father Bösewanz, Father Ferdinand, thank you for letting me come here today."

"Alright. Maïne, please, I'd like you to give this to your parents."

The temple master holds a written invitation. A written invitation from the temple master himself is nothing short of a summons that cannot be refuse. The day and time of the appointment is the day after tomorrow, at the third bell. I gulp, then take the thin wooden board from him.

"Luuutz! Thank you so much for coming for meee!"

"W... what?!"

The instant I see Lutz waiting for me outside the temple, I'm filled with an indescribable sense of relief. Swept up in my emotions, I leap at him, hugging him tightly to convey my heartfelt gratitude. He staggers a little bit, but manages to withstand it. As I press my head into his shoulder, Lutz sighs.

"Did you do something again?"

"...I think so, yeah. I have no idea what I did, but I think I blew myself up in the most spectacular way possible."

He pats me on the head, then grins at me.

“Master Benno’s waiting for you, with a smile that made it look like the veins on his forehead were going to explode.”

“Huh? ...Can I just go home? I’m already really tired.” “He told me to bring you even if I had to drag you by the scruff of your neck. Your color’s still looking pretty good, you’ll be fine.” “Aaaaaarghhh...”

Going to the temple had already frayed my nerves, yet now all of the warning flags that I’m going to be lectured by Benno have been raised. I trusted Lutz as my steadfast ally, but now I feel so betrayed.

Feeling like a calf being led back to its cage, I’m brought to Benno’s shop. As if he’d been laying in wait for me, I’m immediately brought back into his office. I’m told to sit in the same chair I usually do. Across from me sits Benno. Behind him stands Mark. Lutz, instead of sitting next to me, sits next to Benno.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Maïne.”

“...Y-yes.” “Now then, I have a mountain of things I want to say to you...”

I brace myself. It seems like this is going to be a very long conversation. Benno takes a long, slow breath, then opens his mouth to speak.

“Before I get started, I have a message from Corinna. She said she’d like to see the dress and hairpin you wore to the baptismal ceremony. It was a very unique outfit. Very eye-catching! What were you thinking, wearing something like that?”

“It was a hand-me-down from Tuuli that we’d altered. There was no real meaning to it. I don’t particularly mind showing it to her, but I don’t know what my mother, who made it, would think of bringing it out. I would have to ask her.” “I see,” he says, lightly. “Well, please do so.”

He folds his hands together on the table in front of him. He leans forward slightly, staring at me evenly.

“Well, how about you just tell me everything? I have to figure out just what to do with you after I hear about whatever happened at the temple.”

“Huh? Did Lutz not tell you?”

It's already been a few days since the baptismal ceremony. I thought he would have asked Lutz about it a long time ago, but it seems like he hasn't heard anything.

"Second-hand information always gets warped along the way. If I've got the chance to ask the actual primary source herself, why would I need to ask Lutz? Besides, there's always the possibility that there's some things you're still keeping hidden."

He looks at me like a wild animal looks at his prey, and my breath freezes in my throat. It seems like he's going to pursue me relentlessly.

"...Where should I start?"

"After you collapsed during the ceremony. Tell me everything that happened after you got separated from Lutz, and don't leave anything out."

I tell him about how I collapsed, got lost searching for a restroom, and blundered into the nobles' space. When I tell him about meeting the priestess and finding a library, his eyes widen in amazement.

"A library? I didn't think the temple had something like that..."

"You didn't know, Mister Benno?" "Wandering aimlessly around in an area used by the nobility is the kind of extremely dangerous behavior that ordinary people usually don't do. Reflect on your own stupidity. What would you have done if you'd gotten yourself in actual danger?" "Ngh..."

It's true, that wasn't somewhere that ordinary people would come and go from, so when I look at it from where Benno's standing I can see that he's right. Of course, getting lost is what caused me to find the library, so for me it was actually a really good thing.

"The priestess told me that only people connected to the temple were able to enter the library, so I thought that I should become a priestess as quickly as possible, so I went to the temple master immediately to appeal to him."

"Use your damned head! You thoughtless little girl!" "Ow, dat hurds! Dat hurds!"

Benno leans forward and starts pulling on both of my cheeks. Both Mark and Lutz look like they think this is a completely reasonable response, and neither of them lift a finger to help me. I rub my stinging face, and Benno, looking displeased, urges me on.

“And then? You got permission?”

“He told me that if I got my parents’ approval and gave him a donation, he’d let me become an apprentice priestess.” “A donation? Did you do it?”

He frowns sharply, looking very stern. I can tell that he’s concerned that I thoughtlessly made a donation without having actually gotten permission first. To put him at ease, I puff up my chest proudly and give him my answer.

“No sir, not yet. Based on a rough estimate of the price of the books and the amount of money I presently have, I calculated a usage fee for the library. I told them that I could donate up to one large gold coin, but that’s it; I have yet to actually make the donation. I’m not the kind of idiot that would hand over my money without knowing for sure that I’d actually be able to join!”

I’d planned to put him at ease, but Benno, followed shortly by Mark and Lutz, gives me a pained look, as if he suddenly has a massive headache, then slumps his shoulders.

“I shouldn’t need to tell you that you’re a colossal idiot when it comes to money.”

“But thanks to that they treated me very well...” “Well of course they did!”

I’d thought that it was a large sum, but it seems that the amount of money I’d presented is mind-bogglingly huge, even to a major merchant.

“Then, when I went home and talked with my parents, they said that being a priest or a priestess is a job for orphans, and got really mad and told me no.”

“Well, they’re right, aren’t they?” “The head priest said that there were noble children there too, though.”

I tilt my head, not entirely understanding the reason why my father would have gotten so angry. Benno scratches roughly at his head, then explains to me some things about the clergy.

“You noticed that the clergy was wearing blue and gray robes, right?”

“I did.” “The ones wearing blue robes are nobles, the ones wearing gray are orphans. The gray priests and priestesses are effectively slaves working at the temple, making no wages, and serving as attendants and assistants to the blue ones.” “Uh?!”

I’d been thinking that the color difference was due to apprenticeships or formalities. I hadn’t even considered that there would be this kind of distinction.

“If you, who are not a noble, joined the clergy, you’d be a gray-robed sister-in-training. Of course you’d be cut off from your parents.”

I gulp noisily. Now I know why my father had gotten so agitated. It’s not just that it’s obviously work that I am not at all capable of doing, so of course my doting father would be disgusted at the idea of my joining the temple.

“So, Lutz tells me that you went to the temple today to reject their offer, but did you really do it?”

“...Ummm, I mentioned that I had the devouring, and they brought out some sort of golden chalice that one of the stone statues in the hall of worship was holding, and then when I touched it it started glowing, and then they gave me a written invitation to take to my parents.”

Benno firmly massages his temples, breathing an enormous sigh.

“...Well, now they really will bring you in. You should be thrilled, you’ll live a long and happy life. That’s some great luck.”

“Ummm...?”

I tilt my head curiously when he tells me that getting brought in by the church is good luck. Benno broods over something, ignoring the fact that I don’t really understand what he means. He suddenly raises his head,

looking straight at me with utter seriousness.

“Maïne, what would you say to signing a magical contract with me? Saying that the goods you produce will be sold through this shop.”

“...Why?”

The sudden appearance of terms like “contract magic” immediately puts me on guard. Benno strokes his chin, looking at me.

“If we let things go as they are, you’ll be captured by the nobility. If we want to put them in check, we’ll need contract magic to do that.”

“...When we did the contract magic before, were you maybe thinking that I was going to be captured by the nobility?” “No, that was just insurance. I had no idea what kind of kids you were, so my first priority was to make sure I drew the boundaries as clearly as possible. ...However, I did think there was a chance you had the devouring, and if you were going to live for a long time you’d need to make a contract with a noble. I thought it might be useful leverage against whatever nobleman you contracted with.”

It seems that him making a magical contract with me and Lutz, who weren’t anywhere near his equals, was based on a hypothesis that the nobility might step in at some point.

“But I never made a contract with any nobles, though?”

“You haven’t made any contact with nobles until now, so you were able to make that decision yourself, but if you’re taken in by the temple then that’s all over. You need to start planning around being captured. I don’t think there’s a single noble alive that would pass up on the chance to take in a girl who invents things like you do and also has the devouring. Now, especially.” “What do you mean by ‘now’?”

“This is news that I’m only just starting to hear recently, but...” he says, lowering his voice a little. “The lord of this town has been proclaiming neutrality in this, saying it doesn’t have anything to do with him, so there hasn’t been a lot of impact here, but it sounds like the bigger, more central territories are caught up in an enormous power struggle. There’s a huge

political purge happening, so the ranks of the nobility are really starting to thin out, or so I hear.”

“Huh?”

The conversation got really dangerous all of a sudden. I try to pull out my knowledge of history, but I can’t really make any guesses as to what kind of era we’re in in the first place or how things might actually unfold. I’m caught in a maelstrom with neither any information nor ability to take a step back and look at things from above.

“Of course, in order to fill up the holes that these nobles are leaving behind, members of branch families are being sought out, heirs are being adopted, and marriages are being held to build new ties and interests. All sorts of people, money, and things are going into motion. So, since there aren’t that many people, all of the outcast nobility that got sent off to be blue-robed priests and priestesses are being called back into noble society. Can you guess what’s happening to the temple now?”

Benno stares at me, and I tilt my head to the side. I look over to Mark and Lutz for help, but Mark is simply smiling demurely, and Lutz looks just as confused as I am.

“Umm, so is there something bad about what would happen if there’s no nobility in the temple? I don’t really know how the temple is organized, or what kind of work they do. Wouldn’t it be a good thing for the gray-robed priests if there’s fewer people around to work them so hard?”

“First of all, there would be fewer donations. Also, if there’s fewer people to use the orphans, then those orphans won’t have any work, and it’ll be difficult for them to even just keep living.” “That’s really bad, isn’t it?!” I blurt out, far louder than I was intending. Benno sighs, shaking his head. “It gets worse. That chalice they had you touch? The priests call it a ritual object, but practically it’s a magical tool. The blue-robed priests and priestesses pour their mana into it when they use it for their spring prayers, but that power’s been dwindling. When that happens, the harvests don’t produce as much food.” “Whaaat?!”

I had no idea that that chalice was connected to such an absurdly

important thing. I'd been startled by how it had glowed, but I was just thinking that it was purely an expensive, decorative thing, meant to show off the temple's majesty. It's a necessary tool for ensuring the existence of a bountiful harvest. If the harvest shrinks, then the people who will be hit the hardest are going to be poor people like me and Lutz.

"Before the coup, there were plenty of noble children sitting around. To the magic-monopolizing nobility, kids with the devouring were nothing more than eyesores. However, with fewer nobles, it becomes harder to make use of magical tools, so now kids with the devouring are extremely important to the temple."

"Um, sorry, but, what does the devouring have to do with magic?"

Benno's jaw drops in sheer astonishment. He looks like he can't believe what I'm asking him.

"Did you... seriously not know? The devouring is what happens when built-up mana in the body starts acting violently."

"Whaaat?!" "Focusing mana into a magical tool how you make yourself able to control your power again." "This is the first I've ever heard of it..."

It seems like I'm some sort of magical girl! Having tremendous magical powers is the kind of thing that reincarnation is supposed to get me, isn't it? This is finally time for my grand reveal! I'll blast away my enemies with my overflowing mana, and cast a tremendously flashy spell... wait, do I even have any enemies?

My thoughts drift off to a far away place thanks to this new information, but Benno bops me on the head, telling me to pay attention.

"It's common for nobles with more powerful mana to be higher-ranked, and weaker mana to be lower-ranked. Plus, the poorer nobles don't have enough money to get magical tools ready for all of their children. It's not uncommon for a family to only keep the kids with the strongest magic around as their heirs, and send the rest of their kids off to the temple."

In other words, right now, the blue-robed priests in the temple are nobles whose parents weren't able to raise them and had cast them out.

Everyone would be in trouble if they weren't there, but still, that's a sad way to live.

"Ultimately, until now, the temple had been performing their miracles by just throwing bodies at the problem, since the nobles there didn't have a whole lot of mana. However, now that there's less and less of them, the burden on each person is a lot higher. If they're not careful, they might wind up in a state where they don't have enough mana to make everything work. How many blue-robed priests were there at your ceremony?"

"Ten, I think."

The memory of so many men proudly doing the Gl[]co pose, destroying my sides, is still fresh in my mind.

"There's usually twenty of them, but this time there were ten. Plus, since it's the ones who have more mana that are getting called home, I bet you can guess how much mana the people who aren't getting called back have. There's no doubt about it: they're so desperate that they're practically begging on their hands and knees for someone with the devouring and lots of mana to show up. However, this is probably temporary. Keep in mind that there's only a few years between this current thinning of the ranks and when any new nobles born after this point come of age."

"Yeah..."

If it's a short period of time, then perhaps I could bargain based on an offer to donate mana to the temple? I wonder how readily they'd accept a deal where I exchanged mana for access to the library...

As I hum to myself, deep in thought, Benno somehow manages to walk around behind me without me noticing, and he starts grinding his fist into my skull.

"Are you even listening to me?!"

"Ow ow ow!" "You have mana, money, and inventions. Have a little bit of self-awareness! You'd be the tastiest snack for the nobility!"

I straighten up when I hear how serious his tone is. Benno sighs, withdrawing his fist, then shakes his hand.

“That’s why I’m saying that making a contract before you get taken in by the nobility is the best thing to do for your sake.”

“...What would the contract be for?” “Guaranteeing that the goods you make will be sold through Lutz.” “Huh? What do we need that for?”

What this has to do with the devouring or the temple, I have no idea. I frown, wondering if he’s trying to take advantage of my confusion to secure some profit for himself. Benno, however, sits back down across from me, and starts to explain his thinking for me.

“Right now, this is just insurance. You’re careless, hasty, and thoughtless, and when that gets you caught up in some nobleman’s plans and dragged to the other side of the castle walls, this contract will guarantee that we can still communicate with you. Think of the case where you’re stuck in a contract with a nobleman, and we don’t have anything like this in place. You already know that in order to go inside the castle walls you need permission, right?”

“I do,” I reply.

Thanks to my work at the gates, I know that you need special authorization to enter the castle walls. I nod, and Benno gives me a small, wry smile.

“The guild master’s granddaughter will still be able to meet with her family, even after she goes inside the castle walls, because they’re merchants who have been recognized by the nobility. What about your family, though?”

I can answer with nothing but silence. The entire reason I didn’t make a contract with a nobleman is because I wouldn’t be able to see my family again. There’s no way I can answer that out loud.

“I can’t think of a single way your family would be able to get inside the castle walls. However, at the very least, if we have the ability to make magical contract that not even the nobility can interfere with, then why not make a connection with Lutz before the temple or the nobility manage to take you away? If you do that, then I can use that contract as a pretext to take Lutz into the walls.”

My eyes open wide, and I look at Benno, then Lutz. When I make eye contact with them, they both nod at me.

“With Lutz as an intermediary, I can send you letters, verbal messages, or otherwise get in contact with you. You’ll be able to know how your family is doing. Best of all, I think, through Lutz’s information, your family won’t have to be so anxious about how you’re doing. Well, if you really wanted to make the contract with me instead, I don’t really care either way...”

“If I were to make it with you, I don’t think you’d really know much about how my family is doing, would you?”

I don’t want to imagine the possibility of being captured by the nobility, but, if that really did happen, then it wouldn’t be a bad thing for me to have already put things in place to be able to meet with Lutz. Freida had said something to that effect too, how even just being able to see her family was reassuring. However, is it really okay for me to be dragging Lutz into all of this?

“What do you think, Lutz?” I ask. He shrugs. “I’d like to see the nobles’ quarter if I could, and I wouldn’t really mind being the person in charge of contacting you. I’d be worried if you were there all by yourself. I think I’d always have a headache, wondering what you’re getting yourself into.”

It seems like he’d already decided he wanted to do this. However, this is a contract designed to keep the nobility in check. When I think of all of the extra burden Lutz would be put under if he was the other party in this contract, I can’t just follow along with this so easily.

“Making a contract like this isn’t something you should be doing so freely, is it? You might suffer, or experience some awful things, right? Plus, Mister Benno, aren’t you not really making any profit all of this? If Lutz gets hired somewhere else, wouldn’t that be it for you?”

When I taper my lips in dissatisfaction, Benno looks at me in amazement, sighs, and slowly shakes his head.

“You’re not in such a carefree position that you can be worried about other peoples’ safety. Lutz will profit from this, and that should be fine.”

“How would Lutz be profiting off of this?” “You don’t need to think about that. Think about what you stand to gain. Honestly, now that you’ve been given a written invitation, you don’t have very much time at all to get yourself ready.”

Benno, who has much more information and a much broader view of things than I do, is plainly in much more of a hurry than I am. There’s a lot of things that will need to be done before I get taken in by the temple.

“First, you’ll need to establish the Maïne Workshop, register you with the merchant’s guild as its proprietor, and secure a market for your goods. If they changed how they were treating you when money got involved, then when you negotiate with the temple you’ll need to make sure you establish a way to make money. They’re strapped for cash as well, it seems, so depending on how negotiations go you’ll be able to work something out.”

It’s true, that’s one of the benefits of having large amounts of money. Since their interactions with me got so much more polite as soon as I mentioned how much gold I could bring to bear, it would be best if I came to the table bringing money in order to protect myself. Also, even if I were to keep making things, if the temple takes all of it, then there won’t be anything left for me to profit from. I need an outlet for my goods that I can trust. Even though Benno has been constantly testing me and I keep stumbling into his traps, he’s still the most reliable partner that I have.

I nod, and he nods back.

“You’ll need to be careful of the fact that a single commoner isn’t worth much to a noble. If you can think of a path that will help you survive, secure it, and keep all of your routes of escape open. If you can think of any way to guarantee your life, any way at all, do it. Protect yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

The head priest let me sit on his lap and read the scriptures to me and the temple master interacted with me so politely, so I can’t help but think that the two of them are fundamentally good people, but there’s no harm in making sure I’ve got guarantees and escape routes set up for myself. An

ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, after all. I'm vexed, though; I don't have enough local common sense or information to know exactly how to prepare.

Benno watches me closely, then continues to speak.

"Right now there's ten nobles in the temple, aren't there? Don't just let yourself be exploited by them. Find someone among them that you can use. If you get snatched up by the nobility, you'll just be kept under their control until you die, so broaden your options, even just a little bit. Watch them carefully, then pick someone. Think. Don't just float along aimlessly. Struggle to survive."

"Mister Benno, why're you going so far for me...?"

These countermeasures that he's laying out for me aren't something that he could just spout off the top of his head without having carefully gathered information and given it a lot of thought. I can't understand why he would go to all this effort for someone like me, especially now that I'm not going to be an apprentice at his shop.

"If you keep living, you'll be making new products. If you're connected to this shop, I'll profit off of that. You'll be able to get information out of this too, which you'll turn into your own profit, won't you? Just shut up and listen."

Benno starts to sulk, but Mark, standing behind him, laughs quietly, wearing a wry smile.

"Master Benno is simply worried about you. You could get into trouble or cause unexpected things to happen at any time, really; watching you is very hard on one's heart."

"Shut up, Mark," growls Benno, looking at Mark over his shoulder. Mark gives him a thin smile, then continues to speak. "The children who usually apprentice at this store are generally taught all of the fundamentals by their own families. Until now, there haven't been any children that he's needed to watch over so closely. He's certainly not treating you like he would treat his own children, but he does worry about you with the same care that he would have for any of his relatives' children. Of course, the

same applies to me as well.” “Thank you very much, Mister Mark,” I reply, deeply grateful. “Just Mark?!”

When I convey my heartfelt gratitude, Benno interjects, sulking even harder. Mark and I exchange glances, and I can’t help but laugh.

Chapter 70: Contract Magic and Workshop Registration

“The contract is ready, Master Benno.”

“Alright.”

Mark has finished the necessary arrangements for the contract magic. A piece of parchment, sized for a magical contract, has been spread out on the table, and set next to it is a special inkwell, the design of which I recognize from before. Benno dips his pen into the inkwell, then smoothly begins to write the contract. Just like I remember, the ink isn't black, but a vivid blue. When it's ready, I take a look over the finished contract.

The right of sale for all goods produced by Maïne's Workshop is exclusively granted to Lutz. Establishing a proxy requires the acknowledgement of Maïne, Lutz, and Benno, and must be registered with the merchants' guild.

“What is this sentence for?” I ask, pointing at the contract. Benno raises his eyebrows. “Insurance. If the contract's just between kids, then we'll see people who think that they can intimidate you two with violence or kidnapping in order to tear it up. Dragging me and the guild into it will give you a little bit more protection against that kind of fraud. When you make contracts like this, try to find a trustworthy ally that you can use as a third party on the contract. You should remember that.”

“...Thank you very much,” I reply.

He's already going to the trouble of setting up a magical contract. I didn't think he'd put himself in a position to get dragged into it too. I take the pen that Mark offers me, and sign my name at the bottom. Lutz signs his name next, followed by Benno, who seals his signature with his blood.

“Lutz, could you...?” I ask.

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, and Lutz pricks my finger with his knife. As my bright red blood starts spreading across my fingertip, I press it

firmly on top of my signature. Just like before, the instant my blood touches the parchment, it's absorbed, and the blue ink of my signature turns black. Then, just like before, once everyone has signed and sealed the contract, the ink shines dazzlingly. The parchment seems to burn away, as if the ink had ignited it, and as the holes spread across the contract it disappears into nothingness.

As the glittering embers wink out, Benno lets out a long, slow sigh.

"For now, this gives us a good justification to make sure you two can meet, supposedly to sell goods, even if you get taken to the nobles' quarter. Maïne, now it's up to you to think of ways to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I'll do my best," I say, clenching my fist.

Despite my show of confidence, Benno, Lutz, and Mark all give me extremely concerned looks.

"Unfortunately, this'll only work on people who actually think your goods have value."

"Huh?" "If you're up against someone who literally only cares about your mana, then they could just declare that you don't need to do any sort of buying or selling of goods at all. ...Luckily, I don't think any of the nobility around here are rich enough to be able to just ignore a large source of potential income that they don't even have to put any effort into. Also, this bears repeating: the magic of this contract only works within the walls of this town. Be careful." "Yes, sir," I say.

After that, we write out copies of the contract on ordinary parchment. These will be used to notify the merchants' guild, and although they won't have any binding power over the nobility, if something were to happen in another town, these can be used to show that a contract already exists.

"Let's take care of the formalities today. We'll head to the merchants' guild now, to register Maïne's Workshop as a workshop and get you instated as its head. Once we do that, you won't have any troubles buying and selling goods. Also, if you demonstrate that you have alternatives besides going to the temple, as well as the ability to earn money on your

own, you'll be able to be a little more stubborn when negotiating."

"Yes, sir," I say.

The merchants' guild is on my way home, so if I can drop by there and take care of all of these formalities, then that'll give me a little peace of mind. Benno tells Lutz to go get ready to leave immediately, and Lutz rushes upstairs to his storeroom to get changed.

I look up at Benno. "How do you make sure negotiations turn out well?" I ask. "Good question. ...First, always keep in mind what the absolute best outcome you could imagine would be. Then, use that to figure out what you need your opponent to give you. In return, you need to understand what you have to offer, and then figure out what they need."

Listening to Benno, I try to imagine what I really want out of this. My goal is to be able to enter and browser the library. To make that happen, I'd like to join the temple, albeit not as a gray-robed priestess who would be expected to perform physical labor. What I can offer to them is mana and money and, if Benno's information is correct, mana and money is what they need.

We should be able to work something out, right?

"...Ah, that reminds me," I say, "the temple master said that it's not okay for someone to join the temple if they're already members of another guild. He said that he would talk with the guild master about that, but I wonder how that turned out? I wonder if I'll be able to register?"

When I suddenly recall what the temple master had told me, Benno sternly chops me on the head.

"Oi, Maïne. Stop passing off your work onto others. Actually put in the time to make sure you're securing your advantage. You have no idea what kind of ridiculous conditions might get put on you, do you?"

"You're right. To be honest, I hadn't thought that the chalice was a magical tool and that I might wind up being able to live a long life, so I was really just thinking that I had about a half of a year left. I see now that I was being careless."

Now that I've found a way to prolong my life, though, and since I've found a library, I'm significantly more determined than I was before.

"Don't let that determination go to waste. Use your head."

"I'll be careful."

Lutz runs back down the stairs. Based on how hard he's panting, he must really have been rushing. I look up at the seven story building and can't help but be impressed at his speed. If I were to run all the way up and down those stairs, I know I'd immediately collapse.

"Alright, let's go."

Benno grabs me by my sides and, as if this was his expectation all along, picks me up. Since Otto had told me that my walking speed was almost unbearably slow for a grown man to keep pace with, lately I've just been letting myself be carried without complaining at all. Resisting would be pointless; it would only just tire me out.

"If nobody at the temple is allowed to be in any guilds, then that means that you'll be the only person at the temple able to deal with the merchants' guild. If you can't push past their objections by saying you're already registered, then just dazzle them with money until they approve of your workshop."

Benno seems to want to waste no time whatsoever, so as we walk towards the merchants' guild he lays out countermeasures and negotiation strategies, one after another. I really want to be taking notes but, regrettably, I can't. I keep my eyes fixed on him, hoping to force as many brain cells as possible into operation to try to retain just a little more of this flood of information.

"I said this before, but there's a high probability that since there's fewer blue priests, there won't be as much work for the orphans to do, and there won't be as many donations coming in. Lay out all sorts of nice-sounding reasons, like, 'I want to help the orphans find a better path', or 'I want to give them work to do', or 'I want to make their lives better'. That'll help you get approval for your workshop. The temple should be well aware of the fact that no matter what they do, they'll need money to do it."

“Yes, sir,” I say. “Incidentally, make them guarantee that you’ll have labor. Say things like ‘I’ll put them to work’, or ‘I won’t have anyone to look after my health so I won’t be able to do much on my own’, or whatever. Come up with ten or twenty different ways to say that single fact. Keep in mind that Lutz is already working at my shop, you won’t have him for half the week.” “Ahh, I see...”

He lays out individual, concrete, easy-to-understand plans. I nod along, sorting them out in my head. Say pretty things to secure my ability to run a workshop, and exaggerate my weakness to secure a labor force. Certainly, even if I do have a workshop, I won’t be able to do everything by myself.

“If people start understanding that these kids are able to put in honest work at a workshop despite being orphans, then there’s a possibility that other workshops are going to be willing to take in orphans as well. If new products show up on the market, and people hear that those were made by orphans, then people might start to change their minds. That’s entirely dependent on your own skill.”

“Understood. I’ll do my best.”

I’m a little moved by how Benno seems to not just be thinking about me, but about the orphans as well. He sighs, though, shaking his head.

“Hah... there’s got to be limits to how easily you get swept up in things, right? Don’t just take on every problem you come across. Decide what your priorities are.”

“Huh?”

I blink, surprised at how quickly Benno’s opinion seemed to have changed, and he raises an eyebrow at me. It seems that this was some sort of test.

“Until you’ve determined what your own position in the temple is going to be, you need to put your own interests above those of the orphans. Rather, think of how you can use those orphans and make them into your supporters. This isn’t particularly nice to say out loud, but there’s a lot more people worried about what might happen to you than people caring

about those orphans, after all.”

“...I see.”

As I nod in comprehension, we arrive at the merchants’ guild. The door creaks as Lutz opens it for us, and Benno frowns a bit.

“If you’re making something new, or if something’s giving you trouble, or if you need something, come talk to me. It’ll cost you, of course, but I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Thank you very much, Mister Benno. That means a lot to me.”

Since it’s almost evening, the second floor of the guildhall is nearly empty, and we’re able to pass through it quickly to head up to the counter on the third floor. I return my temporary guild card, and hand over all of the forms that Benno had prepared before my baptism to complete processing. The paperwork is thoroughly filled out, designating Benno’s shop as the establishment I’ll be trading with, and Lutz’s name specified as the point of contact with whom I will be negotiating.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Maïne! What might you be here for?”

Freida’s light-pink pigtails sway as she descends the staircase, perhaps coming from the guild master’s office. She notices me as I towards the bookshelf in the meeting area, then rushes over to see me.

“Since your baptismal ceremony is complete, I thought you might come here to handle your registration, but I haven’t heard any news of you! I was worried that you might have collapsed in the middle of the ceremony.”

“Heh heh, good guess. I really did collapse during the ceremony. I’m finally better now.”

I chuckle, ashamedly, finding Freida’s accurate prediction just a little bit funny. She shoots a glare at Lutz, who is looking at a map spread out on the table.

“Lutz was there with you, but you still collapsed?”

“Oh, it wasn’t Lutz’s fault at all. Really, it was my fault this time.”

I first collapsed because I couldn't contain my laughter, and then collapsed again after getting far too excited over having found a library, so this was absolutely all my fault. I feel so bad about making her worry that I want to prostrate myself in apology.

"Hey, Maïne. They're calling for you," says Lutz.

It seems that while I was talking with Freida they finished getting my new guild card ready. Freida goes behind the counter to get back to work, and I approach the counter to get an explanation. They tell me that the information from my previous card has been transferred over to the new one, but I'll need a new blood seal on this one. Hearing this causes my breath to catch in my throat.

"Just do it, Maïne," says Lutz.

I surrender my hand to be pricked by the needle, and when the blood runs over my thumb I press it against the card. With a flash of light, registration is complete. It's a simple process, but a painful one. After I pay the registration fee of five small silver coins, the differences between my temporary card and my new workshop head's card are explained to me. Freida lurks close by, looking like she has some objection to make.

"Oh my, 'Maïne's Workshop'? You decided against joining Mister Benno's shop as an apprentice merchant, is it?"

"I gave up on that, since it looked like a physically demanding job." "Ah, perhaps Maïne's Workshop could sell its goods wholesale to my shop, then?"

Freida immediately gets a sharp gleam in her eyes. Confronted by her suddenly merchant-like expression, I glance away a little.

"Ahhh, I'm sorry. Maïne's Workshop is going to be selling its goods through Lutz, to Mister Benno's shop."

"...Lutz again, I see."

She frowns in dissatisfaction, lips tapering to a point, but what's done is already done. I've already given her monopoly rights on pound cake, so I'd really like for her to give up on this.

“I already gave you pound cake, didn’t I? How’s that coming along? Does it look like you’ll be able to sell it?”

“Yes, Ilse is in quite high spirits as she’s been experimenting with flavors. It seems like she might want to hear your opinion on it before we put it up for sale. You absolutely must come taste it. How about tomorrow?”

I want to eat it, but. Sweet things are the perfect thing to eat when you’re tired, but. Until my negotiations with the temple have concluded, I don’t have the luxury of being able to head over to her place to sample her cake.

“I appreciate the invitation, but I already have plans for tomorrow.”

“Then, the next day, perhaps? If she can, perhaps your sister would like to join us. If she comes along, then Lutz wouldn’t need to come too, right?”

She tries to dazzle me with a mention of Tuuli so that she can get Lutz excluded. Lutz glares at her, making a face that looks like he’s going to snap at her any minute. Come to think of it, she let Tuuli ride in the carriage last time, forcing us to leave Lutz behind, didn’t she.

“Freida, don’t say mean things like that. Wouldn’t it wind up tasting better if everyone tried it? If Ilse is doing flavor research, then there’s going to be several different things to try, you know?”

“That’s true, but...” she says, pouting in dissatisfaction.

I start to describe the details of how a taste-testing might work, hoping to switch Freida’s thoughts from her emotions to a more mercantile mindset.

“If you want to judge how close your product is to being ready to sell, as well as its potential sales, you should have as many people as you can taste it and get their feedback, I think. Kids and adults are going to want different kinds of flavors, and men and women are going to want different ones too.”

“...Many people? How should I be serving it? Even if I were to throw a tea party, inviting a lot of people would be quite difficult.”

Freida's eyes are very merchant-like now. Unfortunately, even though all I had wanted to do was make sure Lutz could come as well, this seems to have turned into a tea party to which a lot of people might be invited. I want her to acknowledge Lutz's invitation, so I keep piling on more suggestions.

"It doesn't have to be a tea party, does it? You could have various flavors of pound cake cut into bite-sized pieces, and then have everyone try them and ask them which they thought was the best. It's more like a food-sampling party, so Lutz could—"

"What a wonderful idea!"

Before I can finish my sentence, Freida claps her hands, her eyes shining. She looks excited, even positively merry. Her expression is full of joy and happiness, but I can pretty distinctly see that she's barely even paying attention to me anymore.

"Huh? Freida?"

"When I've settled on a date and time for the sampling party, I'll be sure to send you an invitation. Of course, Lutz, to you as well. Ah! I'm going to be so busy! Well, Maïne, Lutz, farewell for now."

Freida, looking like she wants to immediately turn the ideas in her head into reality, turns around and runs back up the stairs. If I had to guess, she's probably going to consult with the guild master. I honestly have no idea what she's thinking or how wildly she's going to be rampaging, but since her good mood made her feel like inviting Lutz along, I guess this was a success. I watch Freida as she leaves, thinking to myself how nice it will be to sample different kinds of cake after my negotiations are finished.

Lutz sighs. "The two of you are really alike, you know?"

Benno chuckles in agreement.

By the time we successfully get through all of the formalities of registration and leave the merchants' guild, it's almost dark, despite the long summer days. Even the central plaza, which had been bustling when

we arrived, has emptied out considerably, with few people coming and going. As we walk home, I watch the long shadows that we cast before us. I feel Lutz squeeze my hand a little tighter than normal.

“What’s wrong?” I say.

I stop walking and look up at him. When he looks back down at me, his face is twisted into a complicated expression, somewhere between being angry and being on the verge of tears. He grumbles quietly, almost to himself, the words falling into the shadows.

“...Maïne, are you really going to the temple?”

“Yeah, probably. If what Mister Benno says is true, then I don’t think they’d let me get away. That’s what he was predicting, right?”

His lips tighten for a moment, then he looks at me with unease.

“Can you really do those negotiations?”

The shadows grow darker as the sun continues to set. In the deepening gloom, I can see that he’s even more uneasy, looking like he’s about to cry. I can feel that he’s been gradually squeezing my hand a little bit tighter, bit by bit. Hoping to ease his anxiety, even just a little bit, I smile brilliantly back at him.

“Well, I’ve never negotiated with a nobleman before, so I don’t know how it’s going to turn out. But, if that chalice really is a magical tool, then that’ll help keep my devouring in check, so going to the temple will be good for me, I think, and I want to go there to read books, too! But, no matter how I think about it I can’t see myself being a gray-robed priestess, so it’ll really depend on how the negotiations go. I’m going to try my hardest to make sure I can make my living conditions better, if even a little bit.”

“Yeah...”

For an instant, Lutz almost looks like he’s in pain. He casts his eyes downward, and starts walking again. We continue on together, in silence, for a little while. Lutz lifts his head, pretending like he’s paying attention to where the sound of wagon wheels is coming from, but he’s making an

expression like he's swallowing down something that he really wants to say. As we keep quietly walking forward, I grow more and more curious.

"Hey, Lutz. If you've got something to say, you can say it, you know? I'll listen."

Lutz stops walking. He opens his mouth a bit, changes his mind, and thinks about it a little while, then looks away, frowning.

"...I don't want to. It's pretty uncool."

"Alright, got it."

No matter how curious I am, it's probably best if I respect his boyish instincts to be cool. I nod, and we keep walking.

Again, we walk in silence. The sound of footsteps on cobblestone echo through the streets as people rush home, and from the various windows we pass I can hear the tumult of evening activities, but around just the two of us, everything seems so quiet. Perhaps the sun has finally set, or perhaps we've been swallowed up in the long shadows of the buildings, but our footsteps fall in darkness.

"...You said we were going to make paper together, and books too, and then sell them, though. You lied."

Lutz mutters this as a wagon rides past us, perhaps hoping that his voice would be lost in the clattering of the wheels, but I hear him perfectly. His words, which he had wanted to say as our circumstances were constantly changing but couldn't, strike home.

"I'm sorry, Lutz."

"It's not something you need to apologize for. I know I wasn't strong enough to do anything. What Master Benno said is right, so I want to work with you however I can to make sure you don't have to go through anything too dangerous."

He stops speaking, but I can hear him grinding his teeth.

"...But, it still hurts. You said we were going to start a bookstore together..."

“Yeah, you’re right. But, I’ve been thinking that since I want to read books, I have to make them. So even if I go to the temple, it’s not like I’m going to stop making books, you know? Rather, if I’m going to be living longer, that means I’m going to have to try harder, right? If I don’t get more books, I’m not actually fulfilling my dream, you know?”

Lutz raises his head. His face is still screwed up like he’s trying not to cry, but he tries to smile at me, shrugging his shoulders.

“Your dream of surrounding yourself with books and just spending all your time reading them?”

“Yeah, that one. You want to become a merchant, right? Become a merchant and get to go see all sorts of places, wasn’t it? I’ve got dreams, too.”

When I say that we should keep working hard towards our dreams, Lutz looks even more like he’s about to start crying. Even in the twilight, I can clearly see that the tears in his eyes are on the verge of overflowing.

“I want to help you with your dream. ...But, I’ve been trying so hard because you were there with me. I wanted us to work hard together at Master Benno’s shop. I wanted to do so many more things together with you.”

He hugs me tightly, burying his face in my shoulder. I can hear him desperately try to hold back his sobs.

“It’s okay,” I say. “We can still do that, even if I join the temple. I’m absolutely going to make books, after all.”

“No! That’s not it. I don’t want you to make them with someone else and just sell them with me, I want to make them together with you!”

Lutz had been keeping his unhappiness dammed up, but now that dam is bursting. He shakes his head like a child throwing a tantrum, and my own chest starts feeling tight as tears well up in my own eyes. I hug him too, patting him gently on the back.

“Nothing’s changed from before, you know? We decided already. Whatever I think up, you’ll make, right? When I’m going to make

something, before I talk to Mister Benno, before I talk to anyone, I'm going to come talk to you first and ask if you want to help."

"Even though I can't do anything?"

He raises his head, looking surprised. I wipe some of the tears from his cheeks, giving him a small smile.

"If you can't do anything, then where does that leave me? Is there actually anything I can do? Besides, I don't know what to do, or what even can be done; there's really nobody I can work with to figure out if I can actually make something except for you, right? If you weren't here, I'd be in big trouble."

"...That's not right, though. I mean, people know that the things you make are valuable, so everyone's going to want to help you."

Lutz looks away, frowning disinterestedly, rubbing his face to hide his tears as if he was ashamed that he'd just been crying. Perhaps because getting all of those things off of his chest left him feeling refreshed, or perhaps because he's trying to shake off his embarrassment, he rolls his shoulders and shakes out his arms.

"Nuh-uh," I say, "even if someone else tried to make them, then things wouldn't go so well, and I'd just wind up having to call for you anyway. So, I'm not just thinking that you're going to be my middleman. Really, honestly, will you help me with my projects?"

When I shrug my shoulders, Lutz finally smiles. He grabs me tightly by the hand, and walks forward through the quickly darkening streets, a brilliant smile on his face.

Chapter 71: Countermeasure Meeting and the Temple

When I get home, my entire family is waiting for me, extremely worried looks on their faces. The instant I open the front door, Tuuli and my mother let out sighs of relief. My father looks relieved as well, for a moment, but then raises his voice angrily.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?! How worried did you want us to get?”

“Sorry for making you worry, Daddy.”

Since I had stayed out so late after listening to Benno telling me all those things about the temple, I fully recognize just how deeply worried my father must have been, so I immediately apologize. I take a sidelong glance at the dinner already sitting out on the table as I head towards the bedroom to put down my things. Now that I’ve gotten home, both my hunger and fatigue have suddenly caught up to me.

“I went to the temple, then I went to Mister Benno’s shop, and then I went to the merchants’ guild. That took so much time. I’m tired, and I’m really hungry, too.”

I wash my hands and slowly make my way to the table. My father narrows his eyes at me, eyebrows knitted tightly together.

“So just what happened, then?”

My father’s question seems to be the one on the entire family’s mind. Both my mother and Tuuli look at me uneasily.

“I’ll tell you everything, but can I eat first? I’m hungry, and it’s a long story.”

“...Alright.”

Everyone eats their dinner in gloomy silence, whether it’s because they’re caught up in brooding over things or just because they’re dissatisfied with having to wait until after dinner. I wrack my brains,

looking for a cheerful topic of conversation, and suddenly find one. If I talk about Corinna, we'll surely have at least a slightly more lively conversation.

"Hey, um, Mommy. Today, when I went to Mister Benno's shop, he asked me to tell you something. He said that Miss Corinna wanted to see the dress I wore to the baptismal ceremony and my hairpin, too. Can I show them to her?"

My mother drops her soup spoon, and it clatters noisily as it hits her bowl. Her eyes go wide and she starts looking around the room frantically, her face turning bright red as she starts frantically shaking her head.

"W... what?! Th... that's not something that I'd be fine showing Miss Corinna at all!"

"...Oh, okay. I'll tell Mister Benno you said no, then."

I thought that she might be a little bit hesitant, but I had no clue that she'd give such an adamant rejection. I feel bad for making my mother this flustered, so it's probably best that we turn down the request.

Even though I thought I was being kind by saying that, it only served to make my mother even more flustered. She frantically waves her hands, her eyes darting around everywhere.

"N... no, wait, Maïne! We can't just refuse. Hold on a bit. Aaargh, I can't decide how to answer!"

My mother is in complete shambles. It seems like she's happy that Corinna is praising her, but because she's dealing with someone so spectacularly above her in society, she has no idea how to react. I smile a little, having figured out what she's thinking. Seeing her like this, so far from her usual demeanor, is pretty funny, and also a little cute. I amuse myself watching her panic, muttering to herself as she flips back and forth between all her options while her dinner goes untouched before her. Tuuli, sitting next to me, pokes me in the arm.

"Hey, Maïne. Does that mean you're going to bring it to her house?"

"Probably, yeah?"

Since my mother herself said that we can't refuse, then it's probably safe to assume that she's decided that we'll be showing Corinna my dress and hairpin. I don't know if my mother would come along, or if it would just be me, but someone is going to have to bring them to her. There's probably no way that she'd come here to see them.

Tuuli looks at me with wide eyes that glitter with radiant hope, hands clasped in front of her chest. I tilt my head curiously, wondering why she's deploying her strongest, most maximally cute begging style.

"What's up?"

"Can I come too, this time?"

Last time, when I delivered the rinsham to Corinna, the written invitation was addressed only to me. Tuuli, who had wanted to go, had to stay behind and keep an eye on the house. This time, though, we weren't sent an actual written invitation. So, when I go to Benno to deliver our reply, then maybe it would be okay if I ask if Tuuli could come along as well.

"Miss Corinna is really nice, so I don't think she'd say no if you came too, but... if I tell her in advance that you were the one who made the really big flower on my hairpin, then I think she'd say yes."

"You're the best, Maïne! I love you!"

The pure, innocent delight that shines from her face is astoundingly cute. As expected of our angel. To her, an apprentice seamstress, an established and charismatic seamstress like Corinna would obviously be someone to admire.

As I look at Tuuli, my heart warming, my mother suddenly holds out her hand.

"Hold on, you two. Please hold on. I haven't even decided if we're going yet..."

"Huh? But you said we weren't going to refuse, though?" "Well, yes, but, see..."

The words falling out of my frantic mother's mouth seem to have lost all meaning.

"I think that Miss Corinna would have questions for the person who actually sewed the dress," I say, "but... if you really don't want to go, then you don't have to, you know?"

When I imply that only Tuuli and I would be going, my mother immediately shakes her head.

"When did I say that I didn't want to go?"

"Okay!" I say, smiling widely. "Then I'll tell Mister Benno that all three of us will come."

My mother is at a loss for words. Tuuli looks at her and giggles. I can't help but start giggling too. My mother sighs resignedly, then laughs as well. My father, watching the three of us, smiles, but it's a complicated smile, like he's not laughing along.

"Now then," says my mother, once dinner has been cleaned up and tea has been served, "I think you had some things you were going to tell us."

In an instant, the cheerful mood vanishes and the room grows heavy. Everyone looks at me, urging me to start talking.

"Ummm, let's start from what happened at the temple. I told them that I wasn't going to be a priestess, but then when they found out that I had the devouring, they said they wanted to speak to my parents and gave me this invitation. It's for the day after tomorrow, on the third bell."

When my father looks at the wooden slip I pull from my bag, his face goes completely white. Since he works as a gatekeeper, he probably has seen countless written invitations like this before, and probably knows all too well what kind of meaning a written invitation from the temple master, a noble, carries.

He stares at the official order of summons, his lips tight. "Maïne, what did you do?!"

"I didn't really do anything. All I did was talk, and they read the

scriptures to me–” “You had a nobleman read to you? You–” “–I mean,” I say, pouting, “I didn’t know that the head priest was a noble!”

When I go on to explain how I made the chalice shine, I can see in both of my parents’ faces that all life has left their bodies. It seems like this is far more than they can bear. I wave my hands in front of their empty eyes, tilting my head curiously.

“Can I keep going?”

My father comes back to his senses with a start. He shakes his head vigorously, as if to clear it.

“Yeah, keep going,” he says, scratching his head. “After I went to the temple, I went to Mister Benno’s shop. Mister Benno knows a lot more about the devouring than me, and also knows a lot about the temple and the nobles, so he taught me a lot of things.”

“What kind of things?”

I glance around the table and see everyone looking at me suspiciously. I nod, and take a long, slow breath, in and out.

“So, um, he said that the fever is caused by mana. And that means that I’m not going to be able to get away from the temple or from the nobles.”

“That’s...”

My mother and Tuuli clap their hands over their mouths, quivering in terror. I don’t know if they’re scared because it turns out I have magic, or if it’s because of the authority of the temple, but either way, I avert my eyes and continue.

“But, if there’s magical tools at the temple, then if I go there I can live longer.”

My father, my mother, and Tuuli all look at me with a mix of hope and fear. When I see them looking at me with worried eyes, not with fear over my having mana, all of the built-up tension leaves my body.

“Hey, Maïne,” says Tuuli. “If you go to the temple, then even if you live a lot longer, we won’t be able to see you, right?”

“At this rate, yeah...”

Tuuli’s eyes start filling with tears as she shakes her head desperately.

“What’s different from you being locked up by a nobleman, then?” says my father, sounding like he’s choking the words out. “I don’t want to send you to the temple.”

It’s true, if things keep going along the same path that they have been, then there’s no reasonable outcome besides me being taken in as a gray-robed sister-in-training in exchange for my mana and my donation. It’s an outcome that is nothing but good for the temple.

“Hey, Daddy. Do you know what’s happening in the other parts of the country? Did you hear about the coup, and how all the nobles are being shuffled around differently?”

“There was a merchant saying something like that a few days ago. I’m a gatekeeper, so I hear about sorts of things, but... that doesn’t have anything to do with this, right?”

As I wonder if Benno might have heard about this through Otto, I shake my head.

“That’s why I’m being told to go to the temple. There’s not as many nobles around right now, and the temple needs mana in order to do their jobs. I don’t really know if what Mister Benno said is true or not, but you would, wouldn’t you?”

My father’s breath catches in his throat, like he’d just remembered something. He strokes his chin, eyes cast down, thinking about something.

“The nobles are definitely scattering to other places, hm. I’ve been seeing nobles leave, but lately, I haven’t been seeing any come back.”

“So Mister Benno was right about that?” I mutter to myself. “Okay, then in that case, I think we can make this work.” “What do you mean?” asks my mother. The entire family leans forward expectantly. “Mister Benno said that I was lucky. The temple is in trouble because it doesn’t have many nobles left, so he said that I might be able to negotiate things so that I can get treated more like a noble.” “Tell me everything,” says my father.

He has the serious, fierce look in his eyes that I've seen when he's at work.

I spell out everything that Benno told me in the finest detail that I can, in a way to make it easy to understand. I also tell them about the magical contract and the fact that my workshop has now been registered.

"...So, although I don't know if it'll work until we try it, Mister Benno thinks that we might be able to play up how weak I am and get them to both treat me well and let me come and go as I want. He says that with the way things are for them right now, we should be able to get those kinds of concessions out of them. He told me that I need to struggle for my life." My father's eyes gleam. "Struggle for your life, huh? Now's a great time to think like that, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Emphasizing both my ability to provide them with magical power and my weakness, get them to treat me more like a noble.

Emphasizing both my weakness and my love for my parents, get them to allow me to come and go.

Emphasizing my ability to bring in money, get them to allow me to continue operating my workshop.

"I've got other, more selfish goals, like being able to browse the library and avoid having to do any heavy labor, but even if we can only get those three down then I'd call that a win, I think."

"Got it. Let's give that a shot. I became a soldier to protect all of the families in this town. If I can't protect my own family, then what am I protecting? I'm going to do my absolute best to make sure you get to live."

His eyes burning with passion, my father gives me a confident grin, wearing the expression of a man with a hard battle before him.

The next day, both of my parents go to their workplaces to ask for the day off. After how much I did the day before, it's only natural that I could barely move, so I took the day to rest.

The day after that is the day that we are to be summoned by the temple.

My parents put on their only nice set of clothes, I put on the apprentice's clothing that I have been using to go to Benno's shop, and the three of us head towards the temple.

"Keep me safe," I tell my father.

Like I'd seen the soldiers do at the gate, I make a fist, then bend my elbow as if flexing my bicep. My father looks down at me in amazement, watching me do what the soldiers do when they wish each other a victorious battle, then smirks. He makes a fist and bends his elbow as well, then strikes my fist with his own.

"Leave it to me," he says.

It seems that people at the temple gates have already been told to expect us, because gray-robed priests are already there to guide us through the temple, leading us to the temple master's room. We cut through the worship hall and through the part of the temples where commoners would be lodged, straight towards the area used by the nobility.

The corridors around us gradually grow more grand as we pass through them. My father is full of determination, his temples quivering and his fists tightly clenched. My mother, looking nervously at my father's expression, is pale with tension. I glance at the hand she's holding mine with, and see that all the muscles on it are standing out, quivering.

"Father Bösewanz," says the gray-robed priest, "the girl Maïne and her parents have come to see you."

The priest opens the door for us. Inside, the temple master and head priest are seated at the table, waiting for us. In addition, behind the table are four gray-robed priests, standing in a line.

I hadn't known that they were orphans the other day, but even when I look at them knowing that now, they're still so well-groomed that I wouldn't be able to tell. I wonder if the treatment they get here isn't actually all that bad? Either that or people serving as the attendants of nobles are required to have a neat personal appearance.

"Good morning, Father," I say to the temple master. "Ah, Maïne," he

greet me.

Just as I remembered, he looks like a kindly old man when he greets me. However, when he looks at my parents, his eyes widen. He looks at them in disbelief, fists trembling.

“And these are... your parents, if I’m not mistaken?” he says. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“And what might their occupations be?” “My father is a soldier, and my mother is a dyer.”

When I give him my answer, he looks them over, scrutinizing them so closely that it’s rather impolite. Then, he snorts dismissively, looking down his nose at them. Even though he hasn’t said anything, I can immediately tell that he’s looking down on them, thinking of them as mere commoners.

I blink, shocked by how quickly his demeanor changed.

There is not a trace of the kindly old man I saw a moment ago in this man’s expression as he suddenly starts sneering at us. I am suddenly faced with the reality of how wide the gulf is between our social status, and understand entirely that the entire reason he had been so kindly towards me was because of my money.

“Alright, well, let’s get this over with quickly.”

Without offering a greeting, without beckoning us to the table, while we are still standing just inside the room, he moves straight into the order of business. I wonder if this might be an ordinary sort of thing, but when I compare this sort of behavior to the kind temple master I’d known so far, I can’t help but frown.

The head priest, sitting next to the temple master, is keeping his face neutral, so I can’t see any of the same sort of disdain in his eyes. However, he doesn’t seem inclined to stop the temple master, merely content to watch, expressionless. The temple master clears his throat, raising his eyebrows in a very self-important manner as he opens his mouth to speak.

“I know Maïne had some interest in becoming a sister-in-training, but it

seems like you have some sort of objections.”

“That’s correct, sir,” says my father. “I don’t have any intention to put my beloved daughter in the same conditions as orphans.”

My father is quietly returning the temple master’s dismissive stare with an intensity like sparks flying, but the temple master doesn’t seem to take any notice, ignoring my father’s attitude as he idly strokes his beard.

“Hmph. That might be the case, but Maïne has the devouring. That means that if she doesn’t get magical tools, she won’t live much longer. There’s magical tools here at the temple. If you have any compassion, you’ll let her join the temple.”

This is clearly an order, with no room for negotiation. His snide tone and his rude demeanor are very oppressive and I, unused to this sort of social stratification, can’t help but get irritated. I can tell that I’m not the only one getting irritated at how clearly we’re being looked down on, because my father twitches a little before he replies.

“I must refuse. I will not let Maïne live in the same conditions as orphans.”

“That’s correct,” adds my mother. “Even if she didn’t have the devouring, she’s still very frail. She collapsed twice during the baptismal ceremony, and after that was laid out with a fever for several days. She can’t survive here in the temple.”

My mother’s hands are tense as she replies, ready to protect me. Refusing something a command like this despite the tremendous difference in social stature is basically putting their very lives on the line. Naturally, the temple master hadn’t expected to be so openly refused, let alone by both parents. He grows bright red with rage, all the way to the top of his balding head.

“How impertinent! Be obedient and hand over your daughter!”

This man is acting so indecently that I can’t even imagine that he could be a clergyman in any sort of church at all. My breath catches in my throat. I know that what we commoners are supposed to do when facing a

nobleman like this is obediently bow our heads, but I really don't want to acknowledge it. My father seems to be trembling in anger, but not a trace of it shows in his voice as he calmly refuses a second time.

"I must refuse. There are many orphans here at the temple. They are worked hard, used as playthings, and ultimately discarded. I absolutely will not allow my daughter to be thrown into the midst of that."

When my father says that, my mother grips my hand painfully hard, nodding firmly. I'm so happy and proud of them that I can't help but smile, but it looks like these words have only thrown oil onto the temple master's fire.

"You dare!" he yells. He looks over his shoulder at the gray-robed priests standing behind him. "Seize these impertinent parents, and lock up the girl!"

I don't know if he's being too hasty or if he isn't even thinking about this conversation anymore, but after having suddenly escalated the situation he stands up, quickly enough that his chair falls behind him.

"Stand back," says my father.

He steps in front of me and my mother as the gray-robed priests come toward us. Thanks to the table between them and us, they can't charge us all at once, so they come at us seconds apart from each other.

The temple master looks at my father as he quickly adopts a fighting stance, and gives him an irritated smirk. "If you dare to strike a priest, then you shall be executed in the name of the gods!"

"If it's what I have to do to protect Maïne, then I'm ready to face the consequences."

He launches his fist directly into the stomach of the first priest to reach him, then when the priest starts to double over in pain, brings his knee up hard, directly into the man's jaw, knocking him immediately unconscious. The second priest tries to get behind him, but he swings around, catching the man in the temple with the back of his fist before launching another kick.

With strike after strike, he unhesitatingly went for their vitals, the clearly incompetent priests no match for his fluid, trained motions. There is no way that these priests, who spend most of their time taking care of nobles, could possibly be any match for my father, who has practiced fighting for countless hours as a soldier. The remaining two priests, perhaps unused to this kind of violence, look terrified of my father, inching backwards away from him.

“Hmph, you can fight one or two people, but how many can you really hold out against?”

The temple master sneers at my father's resolve, throwing open the door to the room. I don't know how he managed to summon them, but on the other side of the door are at least ten more priests, and all of them immediately rush into the room. When I see how victorious the temple master looks, something inside of me snaps.

That is enough!

My entire body flushes with heat, like my blood is suddenly boiling. Despite that, my mind remains clear, a strange serenity wrapping my thoughts. My anger has flooded every cell of my body.

“‘You dare’, hm? That’s my line. Do not touch my parents.”

Chapter 72: Settlement

Although my body seethes with a boiling fever, my head is cool and clear. I feel like my body is lighter than ever. When I stare directly at the temple master, haughtily standing by the door, I can clearly see all the blood drain from his face, turning him ghastly pale.

Well, if you get like this just from being stared at, maybe you shouldn't have threatened me with such horrible things, hm? Idiot.

"Maïne, your mana is leaking out. Control your emotions!"

The head priest, perhaps having seen the temple master quickly lose all color, stands up with a sudden clatter, face tight as he calls to me. I, hearing an unexpected voice from an unexpected direction, turn my gaze from the temple master towards the head priest. The instant the temple master leaves my field of vision, the sound of him collapsing heavily to the floor reaches my ears.

It seems like now that I've looked away, the gray-robed priests who had been standing stock still, like they had been stitched to the spot, are suddenly free to move. I hear them rush over to the temple master, frantically asking if he's okay. The sound of their voices echoes distantly in my ears as I look toward the head priest.

"And just how do you expect me to do that?" I snarl at him, tilting my head to the side. He moans, clutching at his chest. "Urgh... like... you usually do?"

"You called me out here to have a friendly conversation, and then suddenly start shouting orders and attacking us, and then when we dare to defend ourselves you threaten us with the death penalty. Please, enlighten me, how might I control my anger? I don't quite understand how."

I snort disdainfully as I look away from the head priest and focus my gaze once again on the temple master. He sits, slumped against the wall. Unlike before, he can't even bring himself to meet my eyes. He whimpers, terror written plainly on his features, and I can't help but laugh a little, putting a bit of my rage behind.

What a funny face.

This isn't the face of a kindly old man, nor the face of an arrogant noble. This is the face of a man who looks at a weak little girl and cowers like he's seeing a monster. I get a little irritated at how this many-faced temple master can't seem to stay anything to me, and take a single step forward.

"G... get away! Get away from me! Don't come any closer!"

His breathing is ragged as he yells at me, like he's in great pain. He's just saying the same thing over and over, like he's so panicked he can't even come up with anything else to say.

Over my right shoulder, I hear the head priest hurriedly calling out to me.

"Please, wait! If you keep letting your emotions control your mana like this, Father Bösewanz's heart will give out!"

"Hmmm?" I say, taking one slow, measured step after another towards the temple master. "I don't mind if he dies, though. If he lives, then he's going to have my mother and father killed, isn't he? So perhaps he should die before he has the chance to do that. If you're willing to kill someone, aren't you supposed to be prepared to be killed yourself? Perhaps you should be happy about this! Aren't you next in line for his position if he dies?"

With my fourth step forward, the temple master goes limp, his eyes wide and mouth frothing. In the next instant, the head priest steps in to block my view. He kneels down in front of me. He grits his teeth as if in great pain, a cold sweat dripping down his face, but looks at me with a very serious expression.

"Let us talk."

" 'Talk'? You mean with our fists? Ah, or perhaps with our magic?"

The head priest's eyes open wide, and he starts coughing violently. A bit of blood leaks from the corner of his mouth. I am captivated by the sight of the bright red drop.

“Don’t kill him,” he says. “If you kill Father Bösewanz, your entire family will be killed by the nobles. I don’t think that is what you want, is it?”

His words give me a moment of clarity. I can’t let my desire to protect my parents run so rampant that I get my entire family executed. I blink, rapidly, and a long, exhausted sigh slips through the head priest’s lips.

“Have you come to your senses?” he says. “...Probably.”

The head priest slumps with relief. He pulls a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, wipes his mouth, and straightens his disheveled bangs. And, with that, he looks as cool and composed as he would have been if nothing had ever happened at all.

“Let’s have a conversation,” he says. “Like you want.”

“And you’ll actually listen to all of our demands?”

He flinches, then lightly shakes his head. He lays a hand on my shoulder.

“...If you want that to happen, I need you to get your mana under control. Do you think you can do that?”

I take in a slow, deep breath, gathering up all of the heat that had spread throughout my body and compressing it deep down, back into my heart. This is something I do a lot, but I can’t help but feel like there’s more of the devouring fever than I thought there would be.

Ah, but it’s not the devouring fever, though. It’s mana?

I tell myself that it doesn’t matter either way as I finish tidying up the last of it and sealing it tightly away. In that instant, all of the strength leaves my body, and I collapse like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Oop,” says the head priest, reaching out to catch me as I crumple in front of him, saving me from falling to the floor.

“Maïne!”

“Are you okay?!”

My parents rush over, and the head priest picks me up, handing me to them. My mother kneels down and takes me, hugging me tightly against

her. My father nervously looks down at me, eyes filled with worry as I dangle limply in my mother's grasp.

"I'm okay," I say. "The devouring fever went wild for a bit so my temperature went up and down very fast, that's all. It happens all the time. I'm still wide awake."

"It happens all the time?" says my father, uneasy. "That?" I manage a small smile. "It's rare for my emotions to run wild like that, but half a year ago when it looked like the devouring was going to swallow me up, my fever was going wild quite often."

While I talk to my parents, the head priest stands up and talks to the priests, giving them instructions on how to deal with the present situation. He asks some of them to look after the temple master, and others to go prepare a room for us to have our discussion in.

"You two, get Father Bösewanz into his bed, then go to your rooms and rest as well. Taking that much magical coercion head-on must have left you exhausted."

"But Father Ferdinand, what about you...?"

As the worried-sounding priest says, the person who should be the most exhausted here isn't any of the priests that had been off to the side, but the head priest himself. He'd stepped between me and the temple master, putting himself directly in front of me, and met me eye-to-eye as we talked.

"Are you... really okay?" I ask without thinking, suddenly remembering the blood leaking from the corner of his mouth. The head priest looks at me, startled, then smiles wryly. "This is my punishment," he says. "I had no idea just how much mana someone who had managed to survive the devouring up until their baptism might have, yet I sat quietly aside as Father Bösewanz made you so angry. It's only natural."

Now that he's finished giving instructions, he walks slowly over to me. Now that he's closer, I can hear just how ragged his breathing really is. It's plain to see how hard he's pushing himself.

“Why were you just observing?”

“I had been thinking that it would be best for us if we could get you to join the temple without any extra conditions. It would save a lot of trouble for us, and I must confess I was a little greedy over what we would gain from the arrangement. I hadn’t even considered that your parents, commoners, would have ever refused an order from a nobleman, let alone be prepared to face capital punishment in order to protect you.”

As the head priest murmurs about how far out of his expectations this was, my father narrows his eyes at him.

“Maïne is our precious daughter. How many times do I have to tell you this, sir?”

The head priest looks down at me. He smiles a complicated smile, with hints of self-recrimination and a thought that he had looked at something terribly radiant. He gently strokes my head as I rest in my mother’s arms.

“...Maïne, I am quite honestly jealous of how loved you are by your parents. After all, those of us here at the temple, whether we are orphans or noblemen, are people whose parents did not need.”

These incredibly sad words, said to me in this dazzlingly extravagant room, will stay in my heart for the entire time I stay at the temple.

With the temple master put to bed, we relocate to the head priest’s room so that we can have our conversation. The basic arrangement of the room and the quality of the furniture is the same as the temple master’s, but there’s no display shelf here. In its place is what appears to be a work desk, covered with wooden boards and pieces of parchment. It seems like the head priest is responsible for singlehandedly managing the practical business of the temple.

This time, we’re properly asked to take a seat at the table. Since I still can’t move my body at all, I am propped up on a sofa. Then, we begin our discussion.

“On a previous note,” says my father, “you mentioned ‘coercion’, right? May I ask what that might be? Maïne’s eyes were glowing with a rainbow

light, and yellow mist was rising off of her...”

What the hell?! I had no idea that such bizarre phenomena was happening! Rainbow eyes and weird mist, what the hell?!

My eyes almost pop out of their sockets when I hear him say that. I’m the only one who didn’t know about it (or, rather, hadn’t seen it), so my silent astonishment goes largely unnoticed and the conversation quickly continues.

“It’s a phenomenon that occurs when one’s emotions run rampant. Mana is circulated through the body and activated, and a coercive effect is applied to anyone that one considers to be an enemy. It’s something that happens frequently in children who have a hard time controlling their emotions; surely you’ve seen it at least once?”

My parents look at each other, trying to remember.

“I’ve seen her eyes change colors a few times,” says my mother. “Usually when she’s acting spoiled. It was never something that I’d describe as ‘coercion’, though. She usually settled down when I told her she was being unreasonable.”

“Come to think of it,” says my father, “there was one time when she’d gone to the forest to make something, then Fey and the others destroyed it. I think that was the first time I saw it. It was a little intimidating.”

My parents are having a lively conversation as they start remembering things, but I, the third party to this conversation, am only growing more and more intensely aware of my own strangeness. I’m pretty sure a little girl whose eyes change colors and starts to give off an intimidating vibe whenever she started being unreasonable would be described as, quite frankly, creepy.

It wouldn’t have been strange for them to get rid of me. Man, they’ve taken great care to try to raise me right...

“The amount of influence depends on the amount of mana used,” says the head priest, “so it’s likely that the difference in power compared to those previous incidents is caused by Maïne having gradually gained more

and more mana. Please, take care not to cause her to run wild like that in the future.”

“If nothing extraordinary happens,” I say, “I won’t lose control of my emotions.”

When I indirectly point blame at the temple master for causing me to lose control, the head priest stares at me for a moment, narrowing his eyes.

“I’d heard that having the devouring generally means that someone has a comparatively large amount of mana, but I hadn’t thought that you’d be able to release so much that your coercion would cause the temple master to faint. ...If I may ask, how are you still alive?”

“Huh?”

I don’t know how to answer that one. I tilt my head, not fully understanding the question, and the head priest starts to explain.

“You need to have a force of will that is stronger than the mana you are trying to keep bottled up. For a child who doesn’t know that they must keep their emotions in check, the amount of mana that they can endure with their fragile wills is quite frankly not very large. If a child is born with strong magic, they die quickly. Since the amount of mana one possesses multiplies as one grows older, the magical strength of a child who has survived all the way to their baptism is not anything to fear. It is odd that someone with magic as powerful as yours has survived for as long as you have.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve been close to death. A very kind person sold me a broken magical tool, once, which allowed me to live a little longer.”

The original Maine died two years ago. Then, if Freida hadn’t saved me, I would probably have died half a year ago. Like the head priest says, making it all the way to my baptism while having the devouring was no easy task.

“I see. But did you not wish to have this kind person help you find a noble with which to make a contract? Without a contract you wouldn’t be

able to continue living. Granted, it is only because you did not make such a contract that you were able to meet us like this, but I can't help but wonder why you would have made this choice."

He really does look curious. I tilt my head to the side as well.

"If making a contract with a noble means I'll be locked away, there's not much point to living anymore, is there? I wanted to stay with my family. I wanted to make books. I wanted to live for my own sake, because otherwise it would be meaningless."

"...Living for your own sake... I simply can't understand thinking like that."

He shakes his head, takes a slow breath to steady himself, then looks at me, my mother, and my father in turn before opening his mouth to speak.

"Maïne, I wish for you to join the temple. This is not an order, but a request."

"I heard from a merchant that the number of nobles here in the temple has been decreasing, so you don't have enough mana, correct? Is it really true that you use magic to help the crops grow?" "...What a well-informed merchant. Well, alright then."

It seems that somehow Benno managed to acquire accurate information. If that's the case, then the lack of mana really will have terrible, far-reaching effects.

"Can you not cooperate with the other nobility?" I ask. "There are various other magical tools that must be kept running in order to protect the city. The fundamental basis of our city's defenses are its magical tools, after all."

I'd been wondering why the other nobles weren't bothering to help, but it seems like they've got other things that they need to do.

"The temple master being who he is," says the head priest, "the majority of the practical business of running the temple falls to me. It is very unusual for a child with the devouring to have as much mana as you do. As promised, I'll accommodate you as best as I can."

“Dad, I’ll leave it to you.”

He’s taking our conditions seriously. Now it’s time for my father, the head of the house, to take over. My mother gently strokes my head. “You look so tired. You should rest now,” she says, but I must make sure I stay awake to listen. This conversation is all about my future; if I don’t pay proper attention, Benno’s going to smack me on the head again. As I continue to recline on the couch, I watch my father’s discussion with the head priest closely.

“Then, sir, here are our conditions,” says my father. “If what you need most from Maïne is her mana, then we would like for her to be treated more like a noble priest. She absolutely cannot be put to the same work as the gray-robed priests.”

The head priest nods, not having to give it much thought.

“I’ll have a special blue outfit prepared for her. She’ll have the same duties as the younger nobles, which largely consist of tending to the magical tools here. This is what I was originally intending to suggest, had the temple master not gone so wild, so I have no objections. How would it sound if I were to have her both tend to the magical tools and, as she has requested, work in the library as well?”

My opinion of the head priest, who is offering me permission to enter the library with no strings attached, is skyrocketing.

He may have a cool demeanor, but he risked his own well-being to stop me, he’s skilled enough to singlehandedly manage the temple’s affairs, he read the scriptures to me, he’s letting me into the library, he’s letting me into the library, he’s letting me into the library!

“Father Ferdinand, you’re such a good person!”

“Uh?”

It seems my deeply heartfelt joy did not reach him. He and my father give me a single, fleeting glance, and then simply return to their conversation.

“Next, if our daughter were to be kept here at the temple out of our

sight, we would be constantly worried sick. We would like for her to be able to come home. We don't have any intention of giving her up."

"...Hmm, I see. Since Maïne is not an orphan, she should be able to go home. Practically, many of the nobility here have homes to go back to as well, so this shouldn't pose any problems." "Pardon me," says my mother, "but Maïne is very frail, so she won't be able to perform her duties every day. Is there something you can do about this?"

My mother lightly covers my mouth with one hand, prohibiting me from speaking, as she moves the conversation forward.

"There's no need for her to push herself when she's not feeling up to it. You implied that she's able to go to the forest when she's well enough; she's not incapable of moving, is she?"

Frustrated at myself for having spoken out of turn before, I shake my head, making eye contact with the head priest.

"Even if I'm feeling okay, it's pointless if I don't have Lutz with me."

"Lutz? The boy who came to pick you up the other day?" "Yes, sir. He's always been helping me manage my health. If he's not with me, I often collapse suddenly and my fever comes back. I need to have someone to help me with managing my condition."

Before I can continue onto my next thought, which would have been that I'll only be able to come at Lutz's convenience on days when my health is good, the head priest nods. Without saying anything, he jots something down on a nearby board.

"Ahh, so you'll be needing attendants? I have no objections there. Blue-robed priests and priestesses generally have several assigned to them."

"Huh?"

Did he just say "attendants"? Having several people assigned to me would actually be really hard on me, though?

As I sit there in mute bewilderment, the head priest looks away from me, glancing at my parents.

“Do you have any objections so far? Any further conditions?”

He’s absolutely fine making whatever compromise he needs to. It seems like Benno was right: these people will do anything to make sure that I join the temple.

“Um,” I say, “Father Ferdinand. I’m currently registered with the merchants’ guild. Will I be able to continue operating my workshop?”

“...The temple master must have told you that you’ll have no use for that while in service of the gods.”

This is the first thing he’s disapproved of. He frowns intensely, deep in thought. Just as Benno taught me, I start to negotiate.

“...However, I’ve been operating this workshop forever. It’s my main source of income. You run an orphanage here, don’t you? If I hired the orphan children to work for a wage, and set aside some of the profits from my products to donate to the church, could we possibly work something out?”

Unlike the temple master, who I’m sure would have rejected me without a second thought, the head priest is in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the temple. This, of course, must include their accounting. As Benno said, with fewer nobles, there are fewer donations coming in, so the temple must be in need of money. As I watch him, waiting patiently for his answer, he sighs, rubbing his temples. “Just how much do you know?” he mutters, sadly.

“...Very well. We’ll have a more detailed discussion in the future about the percentage of your profits that you’ll be setting aside, then put that in writing. As of now, I don’t have enough information to be able to talk about this.”

“I understand. Let’s leave talking about donations and money until a later date.”

I don’t really want to have the conversation about donations in front of my parents. The head priest, perhaps noticing this, quirks one eyebrow, but says nothing, instead looking back at my parents again.

“Any other conditions?”

“No, sir. If she’s given blue robes, is allowed to live at home, and can keep an eye on her health, then as her parents we have no objections. Thank you for your consideration.”

When we finished our discussion, the head priest invites us to lunch. However, the three of us leave immediately, with my mother saying that it would be best for us to let the head priest get some rest. As we pass through the towering gates of the temple, I see the refreshingly clear, blue skies spreading out before me, and I’m struck with a renewed sense of liberation. I’ve solved all of the problems that have been plaguing me.

We head home, my father carrying me in his arms. We walk in silence for a while, but when the central plaza comes into view, signaling that we’ve returned to our usual sphere of existence, my father murmurs, “We did it, huh...”

“Yeah,” I reply. “We just won, didn’t we?” he says, expressionlessly. I give him my biggest smile, nodding vigorously. “Yeah! A really big win. Mom, Dad, thank you for protecting me.”

I finally have recovered a bit of my strength, so I make a loose fist and bend my elbow. My father, breaking into his usual smile, holds me in one arm, and makes a fist with his other.

“Nah, you were the one protecting us, weren’t you? With that ‘coercion’ thing.”

“Nuh-uh, that just me getting so mad that my fever went wild. I don’t really remember it that well.”

Chuckling to each other, my father and I tap our fists together. We managed to get every single one of our demands met, though the financial conversation will come later. I’ll have to talk to Benno about that and come up with a really solid plan so that I can definitely win next time, too.

“I’m a little relieved myself,” says my mother. “Since that head priest is there, I’m sure things will turn out alright.”

I tilt my head curiously. Certainly, the head priest seems like a very

capable person, but I don't know why looking at him would set my mother's mind at ease.

"He stopped you, didn't he? You always just take off running in whatever direction you please, so not having anyone to stop you would be terrible. Even if something happens that makes your mana go wild, you'll have someone there to hold you down and scold you. That's a very important thing."

That's exactly the kind of reason I would expect my mother to give. I can easily imagine my days at the temple being full of the head priest scolding me with my mother's full approval.

"...He's going to get mad at me a lot."

Both of my parents laugh at my prediction.

I think about how if I hadn't been able to stop the temple master, I wouldn't be looking at this scene right now. I let out a sigh, relieved that I'm actually able to return home with my family.

I'm so glad. I went a little wild, but I didn't mess up.

We turn off of the main road and head along the narrow alleyway that leads to our building. When the plaza comes into view, I see Tuuli, pacing nervously by the water well, obviously waiting for us to come home.

"Tuuli!" I call out, beaming broadly. "Maïne! You're okay! You really came home!"

When she sees me, she immediately starts running towards us, trampling the weeds in her path. My father sets me down, leaving a hand at my back to keep me propped up. Tuuli leaps at me, hugging me tightly.

"I'm so glad you're back, Maïne! I was waiting forever!"

Tuuli is so happy that tears are welling in her eyes. I smile back at her.

Chapter 73: Interlude - Visiting Miss Corinna's House

My name is Tuuli! I'm eight years old.

When my little sister Maïne said she got everything figured out at the temple about becoming a sister-in-training, I was super relieved. She's not going to die because of the devouring, and she's not going to be a gray-robed priestess and get treated like an orphan. I was really scared that she'd go away and I'd never see her again, but that's not going to happen, and I'm super happy about that!

The day after Mom and Dad got called out to the temple, Maïne headed out to go to Mister Benno's shop. She said that she needed to ask him some things about how she should be dealing with the head priest, and that while she was there she was going to figure out what day she was going to meet with Miss Corinna. Last time she met with her, she went all by herself, and I was stuck at home. This time, though, Maïne said that she'd ask Miss Corinna if I could come too.

Aaahh, I'm really looking forward to this! My Maïne is such a good girl, always thinking of her big sister! I'm gonna get to brag to all my friends at the workshop about how I got to go to Miss Corinna's house.

Miss Corinna's really amazing! When she came of age, she got her own workshop, and then she started getting orders from the nobility to make clothes for them. To apprentice seamstresses like me, she's like a shining star in the sky, someone that one day we want to be just like.

The story of how her amazing husband proposed to her super dramatically is like a legend you'd hear from a minstrel. All the apprentice seamstresses talk about it. For the sake of his love, he cast aside his dreams of being a merchant, spent all of the money he'd saved up, and then proposed to her! Hearing rumors like that, it's really obvious to see that he really loves her a lot. It's the kind of story that every girl wants to be part of.

I wonder what kind of person Miss Corinna is? All I know is that Maïne said that she was really nice, and also really pretty.

The front door opens, and Maïne comes leaping in. "I'm home, Tuuli!" she says, beaming. "Miss Corinna said that she definitely wants to see you and Mom too. Tomorrow afternoon, she said."

From how hard she's panting, it looks like she was kinda hurrying home. Immediately after she tells me about this, she collapses on the spot.

"Maïne?!" I say. "Urgh... I really wanted to come home and tell you as quick as I could, maybe I over did it? Sorry."

"It'll be a big problem if you can't actually make it out there tomorrow. Come sit down and take a break."

Maïne flops limply into a chair, and her glossy, dark blue hair falls down behind her. She's always trying her best at a lot of different things, so she's gotten a little bit healthier, but she's definitely still not actually strong, and she's still not getting any bigger. She still looks like she's four years old, and I really can't help but worry about her.

When she stands next to Lutz, who's the same age as her, she looks like his little sister, and lately when she goes to the forest, kids two years younger than her offer to help her out, which always makes her slump over dejectedly. She's not weak just because she has the devouring. Even when she got cured, she was still really frail. She said that Freida, who has the same disease, doesn't have that problem.

Maïne rubs at her temples. "...Hmm, am I doing better now?" she says.

She stands up, then starts slowly moving around. She carefully folds up her nice dress and puts it in the bag that she made herself and really likes, making sure that it doesn't get dirty, then puts her hairpin in as well. As soon as I realize that she's getting her things ready for tomorrow, I ask her a question.

"Maïne, what about me? Do I need to do anything to get ready?"

"No, I can't think of anything... but since it's such a special occasion, maybe we should wash our hair with rinsham?" "Yeah!"

Maïne and I start washing our hair with the rinsham I made. I didn't used to wash it this much, but lately I guess I've started thinking that I need to keep myself looking nice. Even at a workshop, the only people who can talk to customers and show them around are people who make sure they're dressed very neatly.

"Hey, Maïne," I say. "Today, they let me sit at the front desk for the first time!"

"Wow, really? That's great, Tuuli!" "It's all thanks to you," I say.

A while back, when I was grumbling to Maïne about how only pretty people got to meet with the customers at work, she said to me, "It's because first impressions are vital when dealing with customers. It is absolutely something that merchants pay attention to. If you want to go from someone who only works in the back room making things to someone who gets to work publicly with customers, then you have to make sure to keep yourself clean, pay attention to your manners, and so on." It was cautionary advice about a merchant's viewpoint.

She also said that I should make sure that my work clothes are nice enough that customers can see me in, and in order to make sure that they don't get dirty I should wear an apron that even covers my sleeves. That way, if I have to talk to a customer, then I can take off the apron, and be wearing clean clothes. I took her advice to heart, and now I'm in a place where I can do work that involves talking to customers, too.

"I'm home," says Mom, as she comes through the front door.

She arrives as Maïne and I are in the middle of talking about what we've gotten done today as we carefully wash our hair. When she sees us drying our hair and thoroughly combing it out, her eyes widen slightly.

"Oh my, you're using rinsham? ...Does that mean...?"

"Yep!" says Maïne. "Tomorrow, we get to go to Miss Corinna's house."

Mom, when she hears this, immediately tells me and Maïne that we're on dinner duty today and starts washing her hair. Since we definitely understand that she wants to make herself as pretty as possible before

meeting with Miss Corinna, Maïne and I just shrug at each other and give up our seats.

“I’m going to wear the new summer dress you just finished making for me tomorrow,” I say to Mom. “Good idea. That’ll keep you cool, and you look good in it, too.”

The cloth that we didn’t need to use to make Maïne’s dress has turned into a new summer dress for me, instead. Unlike Maïne, I’m actually growing healthily, so I’m always getting too big for my clothes really quickly.

There wasn’t enough cloth to make the entire dress, so the skirt part was actually sewn together patchwork-style out of a few different colors of cloth in order to be long enough. It wound up looking like it’s decorative, so it looks really cute. It’s my favorite dress.

I wonder if Miss Corinna is going to think it looks cute, too?

The next day, the three of us leave the house fairly early, making sure that we’ll be able to get there in time even going at Maïne’s walking speed. As we pass through the central plaza and enter the north side of town, the clothes of the people around us start to get more colorful, and I start seeing people who are wearing clothes with lots of cloth. Since it’s rare for me to come to the north part of town, I look down self-consciously at my own clothes, wondering if I’m sticking out too much. When I look up at Mom, I see that she looks a little worried about how other people are looking at her too. Maïne, however, doesn’t look the least bit worried. In fact, she seems really energetic! She’s still really slow, though.

“Miss Corinna’s house is right above Mister Benno’s shop,” she says.

When she says that, it starts to make sense. Mom and I have only heard Maïne talk about these things. We haven’t seen them ourselves. Maïne, though, comes this way with Lutz a lot. There’s no way she’d be worried.

“Oh no, how should I introduce myself?” says Mom. “You could start with ‘it’s nice to meet you’, right?” says Maïne. “Then maybe something like ‘thank you for inviting us here’? And then when you meet Mister Benno and Mister Mark, you could say ‘thank you for looking after my

daughter', I think."

Maine immediately has an answer ready for our very stressed-out Mom. We don't usually need to formally introduce ourselves, but maybe when working at the gates or at a shop, this is the kind of thing you need to be able to bring out immediately, I wonder? She didn't hesitate at all.

"Maine, how about me? How do I introduce yourself?"

"Just put on your cutest smile!" she says, beaming. "I can't think of anyone who wouldn't be happy if you smile and say how much you've been looking forward to meeting them."

Mom and I start practicing our introductions as we walk. Maine watches us, looking amused. Since she's wearing her apprentice's clothes, she really blends in here, unlike me and Mom. I suddenly feel like there's a side of her that we don't know about. It's a strange, uncomfortable, almost frustrating sort of feeling.

"Miss Corinna, hello~!"

Maine is completely unperturbed as she knocks on the door. Mom and I, on the other hand, are not. With every floor we passed as we climbed the stairs, Mom started shivering more and more, and I couldn't stop my legs from wobbling with every step.

Wait a bit, Maine! I'm still not ready!

Before I have a chance to settle my nerves, the door opens. "Maine, hello, come in!" says Corinna. She looks up at us. "You must be Maine's mother and sister. Welcome! I'm Corinna. Please, come in."

The door has opened to reveal a beautiful, charming woman. She is way younger and prettier than I even imagined. Her glossy, pale, cream-colored hair shines like moonlight, and her thin, gentle eyes are a gray that gleams like silver as she looks at us with the kindest expression. Even though her colors make her look almost ephemeral, she also has a really good figure. The parts of her that are supposed to stick out stick way out, and her waist is very narrow. Her body is the womanly ideal.

"Miss Corinna, it's nice to meet you," says Mom. "My name is Eva; I'm

Maïne's mother. Thank you very much for inviting us here today."

Mom delivers her rehearsed introduction, slightly bending her knees and lowering her chest in a small curtsy. I copy what she did, and introduce myself too.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Corinna! My name's Tuuli. I've been really looking forward to coming here. I'm happy I get to meet you!"

"I've been looking forward to meeting you as well. When I saw Maïne's dress, even from far away, it stood out a lot to me. I thought I definitely had to see it up close. Sorry if I'm being a little selfish, calling you all the way out here."

Corinna's gentle smile is infectious, and I can't stop myself from smiling too. Her smile is as warm as a clear spring day.

"Please, wait here for a moment. I'll go get some tea ready."

The room that Miss Corinna brings us to looks like it's a room that she uses for work, filled with embroidered cloth and samples of the clothing that she's made. There's so many decorations, this is a really wonderful-looking room. There's a couple of tables in the room; one in the middle, that looks like it's for talking, and one off to the side that looks like it's for working. The table we've got in our kitchen that we use for literally everything doesn't even come close.

Aaaaaa!! This is so amazing~!

Both Mom and me can't keep our eyes off of all of the clothing set up around the room and the colorful tapestries hung up on the walls. I never thought that I'd ever see something this beautiful. I slowly spin around, taking it all in, one thing at a time. Every single thing is sewn neatly, colored brilliantly, richly decorated, and sewn into designs that are completely different from anything I've ever worn. I sigh in complete wonder, looking at these decorations.

"So pretty..." I murmur. "how in the world do I learn how to make things like this? I'd never think to make any of these designs. Is it really just practice?"

“Skill is very important, yeah,” says Maïne. “but if you want to come up ideas like those, looking at lots of good examples is just as important, too.”

I wasn’t expecting her to say anything, so I turn to look at her. She seems tired, sitting all alone in her chair, legs lazily dangling as she looks at me with her golden eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“If you’re not paying attention to what rich people are wearing, what kind of fads and trends there are, and so on, then you won’t have any ideas like this. Miss Corinna was born into money, so she’s naturally surrounded by good examples. That’s why she knows about what’s good to make.” “So, then, it’s impossible for me?”

I slump my shoulders, having been told that I can never get there no matter how hard I try. Maïne, though, shakes her head, saying “no, that’s not it.”

“I know that going to the forest on your days off is still really important, but whenever you can, you should head past the central plaza and take a walk in the northern parts of town. There’s lots of rich people walking around there, and there’s lots of shops where those kinds of people shop, you know? Lots of different kinds of clothes on display. If you compare them, then you can figure out what kinds of colors and designs are fashionable right now, and use those as reference, I think.”

On my days off, I’ve been going to the forest, but have never gone to the north part of town. I actually think I can count the number of times I’ve gone north past the central plaza on one hand. I hadn’t realized that going someplace where rich people are would be a good source of information about the kinds of things rich people liked to wear.

“And then, the patterns on these tapestries and the flowers on this embroidery... this is all stuff you can find in the forest, you know? If you take a good look around you at things like that, when you have to come up with a design I’m sure you’ll think of something useful.”

“...Okay. I’ll try that!”

It looks like Maïne looks at this clothing and these decorations completely differently compared to me. I wonder if the difference between me, who was swept away by how pretty everything is, and her is the difference between a craftswoman and a merchant? I try to keep my feelings in check as I stare intently at Miss Corinna's work, focusing on trying to find some sort of new technique that I can borrow, even how I am now.

"Oh my, Tuuli," says Miss Corinna, entering the room with a servant woman in tow. "I'm a little embarrassed that you're looking so closely."

"I never see clothes like this anywhere, so I don't get any chance to look at them like this. I'm an apprentice seamstress, but they still don't let me work on big things like clothing yet..."

Lately, I've finally started to be given work to do on small accessories and stitchery in places that won't be noticed, but I'm still a long ways away from being able to make clothes all by myself.

"Practicing the basics is very important! You need to be able to make a nice, straight stitch if you want to make beautiful clothing."

"I'll try my hardest! Um, Miss Corinna? How did you sew this part here?"
"Oh, this? Well..."

As the servant woman sets up some tea and sweets on the table, Miss Corinna explains a few things about the various pieces of clothing around the room. At some point, Mom joins in, listening along with me. Maïne is the only one left out, looking uninterested as she sits at the table.

"Please, eat!"

"Thank you very much."

At Miss Corinna's urging, I take a sip of tea. It's amazing, completely unlike the tea we drink at home. It feels like the flavor's spreading out all through my mouth.

"This is really good!"

"I'm glad that you like it," says Miss Corinna, smiling sweetly.

I glance at my family to see if they agree. Mom's making a face that looks like she thinks it's good, but can't stop thinking about how much it costs, and Maïne has her eyes closed, entranced by the flavor.

"Please, have some of this too."

Miss Corinna pushes a plate towards me, on which is a pastry made of a thin, bread-like dough topped with fruit and honey. I pick up a slice of it, then take a bite.

Hmmm, it's good, but compared to this I like the recipes that Maïne's been teaching me even better.

A little while ago, Maïne went to Frieda's house to teach her a recipe, and came back with a bag of sugar in exchange. Then she started teaching me how to make all sorts of sweets I'd never even heard of, like "crepes", "compote", and "pseudo-cookies". She even says that when it gets colder out she wants to make something called "pudding", but it seems like it needs to be cooled so it won't work during the summer. She also put some fruit, some sugar, and some alcohol in a pot and sealed it up. She says that she's making something that'll be full of summer flavor by the time winter comes around. I can't wait!

"This is delicious, and so sweet," says Maïne, taking another bite. "I'm so envious that you can use so much honey on these..." Corinna smiles wryly. "If that's how you feel, why don't you buy some yourself? You've certainly made Benno bitter enough to afford it."

"I'm keeping my workshop's funds separate from my own personal spending money."

After we finish eating, we immediately take out Maïne's dress. Mom and Maïne show it to Miss Corinna, and they explain all the alterations that we made. Miss Corinna picks it up and looks over it carefully, inspecting the backs of the seams and rolling up the hems.

"I never would have guessed this was an alteration," she says. "It would have been much easier to make something from scratch," agrees Maïne.

As Maïne explains, Miss Corinna writes something on a little wooden

board. She looks just like Maïne does when she's writing on her slate or on her paper. I start to wonder if maybe I should learn how to read and write, too. Being able to write like that is actually kinda cool, I think.

"And this is the hairpin, hm..." murmurs Miss Corinna, picking up the hairpin. The strands of small white flowers sway as she turns it over in her hands. "This is the first time I've seen anything like it."

"I made the big white one here," I say, proudly. "Oh! It's very beautiful, Tuuli," she replies.

Being praised by Miss Corinna makes my heart melt.

She traces a pale fingertip along the flower. "This hairpin is really beautiful. ...I think I might want to make ones like these at my workshop; would that be alright?"

She smiles, gently tilting her head. This is the most amazingly astounding thing that could possibly happen. I hadn't even dreamed that Miss Corinna would like the hairpin so much that she'd want to make something like it herself! Overjoyed, I open my mouth, ready to say "Of course!!", but before the words leave my mouth Maïne shakes her head.

"There are terms," she says. I choke. "M... Ma... Maïne?!"

I absolutely can not believe that Maïne, after having finally been called all the way out to Miss Corinna's house, would make demands! My eyes nearly pop out of my head. Maïne looks at me, raising her hand to calm me down.

"These hairpins are our winter's handiwork, one of our most important sources of income. We can't just give away permission to anyone we want. No matter how much they say they want to make it, if they don't buy the rights to do so, then that only hurts us."

Maïne's words are like cold water thrown in my face. It's true, these hairpins are a very, very good source of income for us. I suddenly remember just how much money we'd made last winter, and lose interest in stopping her.

"Alright, then, please talk with my brother about that."

Miss Corinna rings a bell. The servant lady appears, and Miss Corinna tells her to go get her brother. Soon, I hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Corinna, I got your message, what’s... Ah, you must be Maïne’s family? It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Benno, Corinna’s older brother.”

So, then, is this the Mister Benno that’s done so much for Maïne?

His light, curly hair, the color of milk tea, frames his kind looking face and his reddish-brown eyes. The way he smiles so sociably makes him look very much like Miss Corinna, and his easy, friendly introduction leaves me with the impression that he’s a very good person.

“I’m Eva, Maïne’s mother. Thank you for looking after my daughter.”

“I’m Tuuli! Hello.”

My mother introduces herself, and I frantically follow suit. Mister Benno smiles broadly, nodding at the two of us in turn, then looks down at Maïne, quirking an eyebrow.

“Maïne, what is it this time?”

“A request from Miss Corinna. She wants the rights to make my hairpins. How much are you willing to buy them for?” “Business, then?” “Business, sir.”

Benno nods, and his demeanor changes in a single, terrifying instant. As soon as a truly merchant-like expression appears on his face, the gentle air about him disappears entirely. With a thud, he sits down roughly in a chair across from Maïne, a fierce glint in his eyes as he stares at her.

“This much,” he says, holding up several fingers. Maïne scoffs. “I certainly can’t sell it for that little. I’d rather take this to Freida instead.”

Even though she is seated directly in front of Benno, who is giving off a terrifyingly menacing air, Maïne’s expression doesn’t flicker in the slightest bit as she turns down his offer like it’s the most obvious thing to do. Instead, she looks like she might even be a little gleeful when faced with this competition.

“We’ve already decided that the things Maïne’s Workshop makes would

be sold through Lutz, haven't we?"

"The things Maïne's Workshop makes, correct? That doesn't include recipes or rights, you know?" "You cheeky little...!"

Benno's exasperated shout causes Mom and I, who are still seated at the same table as these two, to flinch back in shock. Maïne, however, just smiles sweetly, tilting her head curiously to the side.

"Oh, speaking of which, Mister Benno! How much did you decide you're selling rinsham for? I had a chat with Freida, and it seems that when it comes to the rights for a completely new product that has no other competition, prices should start at no lower than a large gold coin, shouldn't they? I think I might have been selling my ideas to you for very reasonable rates! Hee hee hee~..."

I'd heard her talk about it before, but this is the first time I've seen Maïne working as a merchant. I know that hearing about it and seeing it are two entirely different things, but seeing her dealing evenly with such a terrifying adult is leaving me completely dumbfounded.

What do I do? My little sister's scary...

At home, she's always worn out, she gets sick whenever she tries to do any work, and she's just as useless at helping around the house as she's always been, so this is the first time I've seen her take such an active, prominent role in something. I'm honestly shocked. I know she'd been aiming to become an apprentice merchant at Mister Benno's shop and gave it up because her health wouldn't allow it, but I wonder if she'd really wanted to stick with it? This really seems to suit her.

"This will take a while," says Miss Corinna, standing up suddenly. "Please, come this way."

"Huh? ...Huh?"

Corinna beckons us over to the table on the edge of the room. Mom and I exchange a look, then quietly stand up and follow her. I'm worried about Maïne, but even if we stayed with her, it really didn't feel like there was anything we could do to help her.

“My brother looks like he’s enjoying himself very much, so it’ll probably take a while,” she says quietly, looking at the other table. “...That said, I’m really impressed by Maïne, how she’s able to negotiate with my brother like that.”

This is the first time I’ve ever realized how amazing Maïne can be. I’m her older sister, but I didn’t know anything about this until just now.

“How about we leave the merchants’ talk to those two, and have our own discussion about sewing? Remind me, we’d been talking about how I shaped this skirt to drape like it does, right?”

“Oh, yes! Please.”

While the other table works their way through their haggling, a lively conversation about sewing grows at our table as we sip our tea. Miss Corinna kindly explains to us a lot about the kinds of styles and decorations that are currently in fashion with the nobility. It seems like there are a lot of different methods for sewing things, because she’s mentioning names of things that, even when I hear them clearly, don’t bring to mind anything that would help change the shape of a skirt. These are words that I would never hear at the workshop, no matter how much I talked with coworkers, and Miss Corinna is mentioning them one right after the others.

“What’s that there?”

Whenever I have a question, Miss Corinna kindly answers it for me. I’m happy, but I’m also feeling a little ashamed. I’ve been working as an apprentice for a whole year now. I didn’t think that I had so much left to learn. I’m fully realizing that just asking questions isn’t going to be enough. If I don’t put a lot of effort into practice and study, I’m never going to get to make any clothes for the customers.

“This is a kind of dress that is only just starting to come into fashion,” she says, gesturing at a dress that’s shown promptly in the center of a display.

It looks like the kind of dress that a noblewoman would wear to a fancy tea party. The cloth is glossy, the thread is fine, and the embroidery added

here and there is simply splendid, and I can't help but sigh in admiration.

"It's lovely," I say. "But, I can't believe that you'd need a whole dress just for one use. It seems like it's a huge waste of money to me..."

"Ah, you might be right. But think about it this way: when we sleep, when we go out, when we do dirty work... we have different kinds of clothes for different kinds of situations, don't we? When you have more money, then the situations you need different clothes for get more and more specific." "Huh..."

Suddenly, there's a loud clatter from the other table, as if someone had stood up very forcefully. When I look over in shock, I see that both Maïne and Mister Benno have stood up and are staring right at each other, with only the table providing any separation between them.

"You're not the slightest bit cute anymore, girl."

"It's all thanks to your training, sir." "Hmph, maybe I gave you too much advice..." "Ah, but making sure you gather information from several sources so that you can be as accurate as possible is one of the fundamental principles of being a merchant, isn't it?"

The two of them shake hands, exchanging rueful smiles. It somehow feels like there is something dark lurking behind each of them that they're keeping restrained.

Yep, I don't think I could ever be a merchant, is the only thought that crosses my mind when I look at the two of them.

Maïne glances restlessly around the room, looking for us. When she spots us, she rushes over.

"We made a deal," she says as she gets closer, "so Mom, please teach Miss Corinna how to make the hairpins."

She grabs a cup of tea, which has grown cold by now, thanking Miss Corinna for bringing it out.

"Ahh... my throat got really dry."

"Good work," says Corinna. "May I ask, how much did you settle on? I'll

be deciding how much I sell them for based on that.”

Maine glances nervously at me and Mom, then quickly holds up a few fingers for Miss Corinna to see. Miss Corinna gasps slightly as she looks at Maine’s outstretched fingers. This must be some sort of merchant-specific sign, I think. I can’t help but get a little annoyed, since I have no idea what it actually means.

“We’ve decided that you’ll make hairpins at your workshop for one year, and during that time you’ll have a total monopoly on selling them.”

“Even still, I’m impressed that you managed to get that much out of my brother.”

Corinna really does seem impressed when she looks at Maine. It seems like that finger sign translates to a particular amount of money.

“Hey, Maine,” I say. “How much is that?”

I’m legitimately curious as to how much the rights to make these hairpins might actually cost. When I ask, though, Maine suddenly looks extremely troubled. She glances at Mom, then at Miss Corinna, then lets out a quiet moan.

“You can’t say how much?”

“I mean, it’s a perfectly reasonable price...” she says. “It’s not like I can’t say it, but I really don’t want to...”

I keep pestering her, despite how pained she’s sounding. Eventually, she gives in, not even bothering to hide how reluctant she’s feeling.

“...One large and seven small gold coins,” she mutters. “What?! Did you say gold coins?!”

I’d thought that it was going to be expensive, but I’d been thinking that it was going to be a couple big silver coins. I was off by two entire digits, and the shock of it crashes into my brain like a bullet. My jaw drops, and Mom’s eyes nearly bulge out of her skull.

“It sounds like a lot of money,” she says, frantically waving her hands, “but it really is a fair price for selling the rights to something. I mean, this

was Mister Benno. I really didn't rip him off! Also, these funds are for Maïne's Workshop, so it's not like this is my own money!"

No matter how desperately she's chucking out excuse after excuse, I can't believe at all that Maïne could have so calmly been dealing with a pile of money that huge.

I mean, these are large gold coins, right? It doesn't matter that she's insisting it's not her own money, but just how much does she have?! Is she secretly really amazing?! Wouldn't it be way better for her to be in business instead of going to the temple?

Chapter 74: Interlude - Recipes for Desserts

My name is Ilse. I'm the house cook for the guildmaster of the merchant's guild. Hm? Didn't anyone tell you it was rude to ask a woman how old she is?

I set myself on the path to becoming a cook from a very early age. This was the most natural outcome for me, since my parents ran a restaurant when I was growing up. When I was very little, they just had a little food cart, but as I grew I watched them get set up in a small shop right inside the eastern gates. Because of all of the training they gave me, even before I started my apprenticeship I already knew how to cook and had a much better grasp of finances than the other pre-baptized children.

After my baptism, I apprenticed at a shop belonging to some acquaintances of my parents, and I quickly started absorbing as many new recipes as I could. Learning made me so happy, so I memorized every recipe I was taught, watched the other cooks around me to steal their recipes, and spent long hours seeing if I could make them even better than they already were.

As I bounced around from shop to shop, I got better to the point that people started telling me that maybe I should be working for the nobility. My parents objected, saying that there was a chance I'd never be able to come back home if I did that, but I brushed them off and went to work for a noble house. It's only natural, right? How could I possibly pass up the opportunity to learn the kinds of recipes that are prepared for the nobility?

I was put to work as the lowest of prep cooks, charged with doing the menial ingredient preparation and washing the dishes. There, I quickly started stealing the techniques of the head chef. I learned that the ingredients and seasonings used in the nobility's food are enormously different compared to what the rest of us eat. Even the plates they eat off of are more extravagant than anything you would see in any restaurant in

the city. I spent every day studying every single detail.

However, that only lasted a few short years. No matter how hard I pursued my studies, I reached a point where I just couldn't climb any higher through the ranks. After all, it's not skill that you need to rise to prominence in a noble house. It's your lineage and your connections.

My grumblings about this reached the ears of the guildmaster of the merchant's guild. He'd been out looking to a head chef to hire away from their position to work at his house, but when he heard about my skill and the fact that I was at a dead end in my career he offered to hire me. He told me that his granddaughter would be going to the nobles' quarter when she grew up, and he wanted me to make for her the kinds of food that the nobility eat. He didn't want her to face any hardships when she eventually left to go live there all by herself, he said.

I accepted on the spot. My chance to demonstrate my true skills as head chef had finally come around. On top of that, this was at the home of the guildmaster of the merchants' guild, who had more money than even some of the lesser nobility! He made sure that the kitchen was furnished with the same equipment you'd find in a nobleman's kitchen, and arranged for me to have access to the same ingredients and seasonings. This job had me doing exactly what any cook would dream of, in the perfect workspace. And, in order to make full use of this ideal environment, I have spent every day exercising my skill to my utmost. I have never before had a life more enjoyable and fulfilling than this.

I had utmost confidence in my skills. I took great pride in all of the recipes I'd gathered throughout my career. Yes. Until Maïne came crashing in.

That was a shock.

Sugar is an ingredient that had only recently been introduced to this region from Central, and, even though this is the guildmaster's house, had only just become available to me here. There is no way that anyone here could have had time to establish any sort of culinary principles around its use. I'd been thinking up a variety of possible uses for it, but hadn't yet

had enough time to do any proper experimentation with it.

Despite this, Maïne immediately produced desserts with it as if she'd been using it every day in her life. She lacked the physical strength and stamina to make anything herself, so the actual cooking was done entirely by me, but she gave me instructions in a way that wouldn't have been possible if she hadn't known a recipe.

The "pound cake" that we baked was a fluffy, moist dessert with a refined taste. The way it seemed to melt in my mouth was unlike any recipe I had ever encountered before. That's right, even in my time cooking for the nobility.

However, the girl who taught the young Miss Freida this recipe is a commoner, the daughter of a soldier and a dyer. She does not live in a situation where she should have easy access to luxury goods like sweets. The only source of sweet things in her diet should be the fruits and berries that she can find in the forest.

Where in the world did she learn this recipe?

After that day, I started experimenting with the pound cake recipe that she'd taught me. I experimented with how much froth I whipped into the batter, how hot I kept the oven, how long I baked it for, and so on. After countless variations, I created what I thought was the ultimate masterpiece, the finest cake I could make with all of my skill. It was so good that even Miss Freida started wondering if this was something that could be sold to the nobility.

She said that she wanted to have Maïne sample it, say how delicious it is, and sell us the rights to it. Maïne has the devouring, she said, and is looking for connections with the nobility. Miss Freida thought that she could offer to introduce Maïne to a noble who would give her favorable conditions in exchange for the rights to the pound cake.

However, despite Miss Freida's scheme, Maïne didn't show her face at all, even as summer grew closer. Miss Freida took drastic measures to bring her here, only to have her refuse the offer with the calm of a girl who didn't actually realize her life was running out.

"Welcome, Maïne," I said. "Glad you could make it. I baked some pound cake today, and I'd love to hear what you think of it."

After taking a bite of the pound cake that I had improved again and again, she offered a plan to improve it further in exchange for a bag of sugar.

"If you grate ferigine peel and add it to the batter, that'll change both the smell and the taste, and it'll still be delicious. You could add other things, too, and those will change the flavor as well. As for what exactly to put in and exactly how much, please do some experimentation on your own. I'll tell you this as a bonus, too: if you're going to bring this out to serve to nobles, then you could thoroughly whip heavy cream and make a fringe around the edge of the cake, then decorate it with fruit to make it look really extravagant," she said.

Now, I grip my bowl tightly, beating together batter for a pound cake with ferigine peel mixed in. I have no doubt about it: Maïne, who can so immediately spit out ideas for improvements, must know more recipes.

I want them. I want those new recipes. I want the recipes that Maïne knows.

"Ilse, Ilse! I brought Maïne!"

Miss Freida opens the kitchen door and rushes in with a huge smile on her face. Ever since she'd decided that she was going to be throwing a tasting party, she's been unusually energetic. She's roped the entire family into this and is pulling out all of the stops to make this a success.

Since she had been very weak ever since she was born, when I first started working here I noticed that she spent the majority of her time in her room. Now, though, it's difficult to imagine that the Miss Freida in front of me is the same girl who enjoyed spending all day shut in her enormous room, counting money. She's changed so much, ever since she met Maïne. Now, she's been burning with a desire to become a better merchant than Benno, who has been quickly amassing clout in this town as of late, and lure Maïne over to work for her. Miss Freida, of course, is the kind of girl who drags her entire family into whatever she gets excited

about.

“Now then,” she says to Maïne, “these are the things you suggested might appeal to kids. What do you think?”

She leads her over to a table in the corner and starts setting out small slices of the cakes that I’ve made. It seems that she’s brought her over today to ask her questions about the tasting party. Maïne glances around the table as she answers the question.

“Well, commoner kids won’t be able to afford it, but merchant kids would probably be able to tell how much it’s worth, and they’d probably have enough money to actually buy it, right? And if they’re around apprentice age, then they should be able to read... Actually, most importantly, when someone grows up, they never forget the kinds of food that they liked when they were kids.”

“Ah, I see...” murmurs Freida, writing something on a wooden board.

Freida seems to be taking all this in stride, but this is very strange to me. Maïne, thanks to her devouring, has been slow to mature, so it’s difficult to see her as anything but a very young, unbaptized little girl. Despite that, she’s making some very adult comments, isn’t she?

“And then also, when you’re selling the pound cake, instead of selling the entire cake, you could maybe just sell slices. You’d be able to sell those for less, and increase the number of actual sales, I think. You’d get people wanting to share a slice with their sweethearts, or maybe give them to their kids to congratulate them for their baptisms, and so on...”

“I’ve been planning to start by selling these among the nobility,” replies Freida, “as a high-class dessert.”

Miss Freida, who owns monopoly sale rights, wants to price it as high as she possibly can. Maïne wants to lower the price a little so that it can be sold to many more people. Even though these two girls are the same age and trying to sell the same thing, they have two entirely different schools of thought about it.

“I get that you’re trying to get as much as you can out of your monopoly,

but these are sweets. I think it's a better idea to try to make it really popular so you can get a lot of customers..."

"My monopoly lasts for just one year. Why would I want it to be popular after my year is up? I'd prefer to sell it exclusively to the nobility for that year and try to price it as high as I possibly can." "Hmm. Well, in that case, if you use seasonal fruits, then you'll be able to offer new flavors each season. Making little differences like that will keep your regular customers happy."

Seasonal flavors, she says? My ears immediately pick up on her offhanded remarks. As different seasonal fruits flash across my mind, I cock my head curiously.

"There's no seasonal fruits in winter, right? What would we use then?"

"Paru is a winter fruit, isn't it? Also, you could use 'rumtopf'—"

Maïne's eyes go wide and she snaps her mouth shut mid-sentence. The silence hangs awkwardly in the air, and I raise my eyebrows at her. She glances nervously around the room, then crosses her fingers together in front of her mouth.

"...Any more will cost you."

From the awkward face she's making, it seems like she's finally realized that her mind tends to wander off in a conversation and leaves her to thoughtlessly leak valuable information.

Freida chuckles. "How much might it cost, then? I've already set aside quite a bit of money so that I can make sure to pay you for your knowledge."

Maïne, when paid a price she thinks is fair for her information, often throws in extra knowledge on top of that as a freebie. Miss Freida says that, rather than being stingy with our profits and trying to cheat her, giving her an actually fair price and building a solid, friendly relationship of mutual trust is better for us in the long run. It was a little astonishing to hear her say that, since she'd previously been of the belief that the fundamental nature of merchants was that of deceit.

“Umm, well, what I’m calling ‘rumtopf’ is really just a way to pickle fruit in rum. It takes time for it to get tasty enough for that, but by winter you should have something you can use in a pound cake.”

“How does five large silver coins sound for that?”

If it’s just pickling fruit in rum, then the rest is just a matter of trial and error. I start thinking of ways I could still make things work if, in the worst case, negotiations fall through completely, but then Maïne glances at the bag of sugar.

“...Since sugar really isn’t on the market here, then that means that it’ll be hard for anyone else to make or use ‘rumtopf’, isn’t it?”

Looks like this pickling process uses sugar, too. In that case, it’s probably worth asking her. Sugar-based cuisine is still very much in the experimental stages, and nobody has yet to come up with any real recipes. I exchange a glance with Miss Freida, who subtly nods back at me.

“Then perhaps eight small gold coins would suffice?”

“Alright. I’ll tell you how to make and use it. I don’t think there’s any need for a contract, since you’ll basically already have a monopoly until sugar really makes it onto the market, right?”

After they tap their guild cards to finish their transaction, Maïne points out a jar sitting on one of the kitchen shelves.

“We’ll need a jar like that. Do you have a spare?”

“We can use that one,” I say. “There’s nothing in it right now. What else do we need?”

As Maïne starts listing off instructions, I start moving around the kitchen to get everything ready. She says we’ll need to take several lutebelles, a seasonal fruit, wash them thoroughly, cut them up into chunks that are roughly equally-sized, and put them in a bowl. Then, we’ll need to fill the bowl halfway with sugar and let it sit. The sugar, she says, will draw out the moisture from the fruit, so I’ll need to leave it until it looks like the sugar is dissolving.

“Maïne,” I say, “do you know how much sugar costs? Are you sure we really need to be using all of this?”

“It’s a preservative,” she says. “If you’re stingy with it, then the fruit will bruise easily and won’t be edible. Also, for the rum, you’re going to want the strongest rum you can find. Otherwise, the fruit will rot.”

I have a feeling that this girl, who trades her recipes and rights away for huge sums of gold, might not actually have a good sense for money. If she knew that sugar was literally worth its weight in silver, would she be using it in huge piles like this?

“Once all the moisture’s been sucked out of the lutebelles, put it in this jar and then add some rum. ...Umm, if any of the fruit isn’t fully covered, then that part’ll get moldy. So then after about ten days, you can add other fruit. I think pyuhl and bralle are in season soon, right? If you put a bunch of summer fruits in there, then you can eat them in winter. Oh! That’s right. This doesn’t work really well with ferigine, I don’t think.”

Miss Freida is quickly writing down all of the important points. I commit everything to memory as well as I stir up the contents of the bowl. I can already see a bit of the moisture being sucked out of the fruit.

“Have you made this?” I ask. “Yeah. I used the sugar you gave me last time. It’s my first try making it too. So you can use this when making pound cake, or you can maybe use it as a jam substitute too. I also think it would be really tasty in a ‘parfait’ or served with ‘ice cream’, too...”

Maïne looks like she’s very much looking forward to making all of these things as she stares, entranced, off into space, a smile on her face as she continues rambling. Miss Freida suddenly startles, looking back at the table.

“Oh no! We’re getting distracted. I brought you here to talk about cake tasting, after all.”

“Ah, yeah, you’re right. So, about that, I kinda want to invite Mister Benno too. Is that okay?” “Why, might I ask?”

A sharp glint enters Miss Freida’s eyes as she looks closely at Maïne.

Maïne scratches her cheek, looking off into space as if she's trying to recall a conversation she'd had with Benno earlier.

"Ummm, well, a tasting like this is rare, isn't it? He's interested in seeing what kind of sweets you're going to be selling, but he's also interested in just coming to the event itself."

"...I see. Mister Benno, hm."

After a moment of pondering, Miss Freida suddenly looks up, eyes gleaming. It seems like she's just thought of something. She quickly spins around and starts walking towards the kitchen door.

"I have something I must go ask my grandfather. I'll return shortly. Ilse, please take care of our guest."

Thanks to the fact that Benno, who she one-sidedly considers to be her rival, will be coming to the party, it seems like Miss Freida's fire has grown even hotter. Leaving Maïne behind, she walks briskly out of the room, somehow still as elegant as always.

"...She left," says Maïne. "She doesn't usually act like this," I remark. "Freida said the same thing about you, actually, back when I told you how you could make your pound cake better."

She snickers, and I sigh. I thought I'd left my days of being unable to contain myself when faced with a new recipe long behind me, but it seems like I haven't changed at all.

"Your new recipes are hard," I say. "...Urgh. I'm sorry about that."

"Nothing you need to apologize for," I say, lightly. "I still want to know them. Now, why don't you try these? I'd like to hear what you think."

I line up a slice of the basic cake that she'd taught me how to make, a slice of a cake that I'd added grated ferigine to to change its aroma, a slice where I'd substituted honey for some of the sugar, and a slice with walnuts. Then, I fill a cup with a tea I'd picked to match the cakes and set it in front of her.

"Wow, these all look delicious!" she says, eyes sparkling. Beaming, she

starts to taste each cake, cutting neat pieces off of each slice with her fork and slowly lifting them to her mouth. The precision with which she moves her fork and her immaculate posture reminds me of the young noblewomen I'd seen who had had table manners thoroughly drilled into them from a young age. At the very least, her attitude is definitely not one of a common girl who ordinarily never gets to eat sweet things.

She takes a long drink of tea, seeming to enjoy that too, then lets out a long, satisfied sigh.

"I think my favorite out of all of these was the ferigine cake, probably?"

"Why's that?" "I really liked how the flavor seemed to fill my mouth." She takes another gulp of tea. "...Hm, these tea leaves might really work in a cake, too," she mutters, squinting down into her cup. "The leaves?" I say. "Wouldn't that be hard to eat?" "...Ah!" she says, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. "I've said too much."

It seems like this might be yet more valuable information. I snort, then bring out another full bag of sugar, the same size as I'd given her last time. The table rattles as I set it down heavily.

"I'll trade you a bag of sugar for the tip," I say. "I'm only going to get antsy if we just leave it like that. You said you made some of this 'rumtopf', so you're probably running low, aren't you?"

To be perfectly honest, I hadn't even imagined that you'd put tea leaves in a desert. Deserts are sweet things. Sugar is extremely expensive, so I'd heard that the current thinking in Central is that you need to highlight its sweetness when you use it. I can't imagine that adding tea leaves into a cake would make anything sweet at all. Also, I don't actually have enough time to experiment with all of the different kinds of ways to use all of the different kind of leaves to figure out what she's talking about.

She hums, thinking about it for just a little while. "...For a bag of sugar? Eh, sure. You make tasty things for me to eat." She smiles. "If you grind the leaves into a powder so that you can't taste them individually, then adding tea into the batter can change the aroma of it."

"You mean, this tea?"

I point at the pot that holds the tea leaves I'd served to Maïne, and she gives me an emphatic nod. I stare distrustingly at the pot for a while, then go to fire up the oven. I sit down next to Maïne as she continues to eat her cake and start grinding up tea leaves. I should try this out immediately, I think. I feel bad for neglecting Maïne, my guest, but she gives me a happy smile, saying that she's really just here to taste things and is content to watch me work.

"Say, Maïne. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure, what is it?" "You don't just have good ideas about sweets, do you? I bet you've got some ideas for soup, as well." "Huh?!"

Maïne freezes, fork in her mouth, and looks up at me with her wide, startled, golden eyes. My hands are currently occupied whipping a bowl full of eggs, so I shrug at her with one shoulder.

"It's something I thought of when I saw what you left behind on your plate back when you stayed with us. You ate everything but the soup, didn't you? I thought at first you just didn't like vegetables, but then you ate pretty much everything else I fed you. You've got another tasty secret in you, don't you, Maïne?"

"...You're very perceptive, Miss Ilse."

She removes the fork from her mouth and gently sets it down on her plate.

"Will you teach me?"

"Ummm... the soup is actually something I'm kinda worried about. If my circumstances change a little, I might find myself having to take care of nobility, even if I don't want to. I'm hoping to keep some secrets to myself so I can have them up my sleeve in case I need them to protect myself."

"Ah, I see."

She looks so exhausted that I decide not to press her any further, so I just shrug. I worked in a noble house, too, so I know what she's afraid of: the differences in social stature and the constant danger of being cut down. It's entirely natural for her to want to hold on to a few trump cards,

and she really should.

“Since you’ve got a temporary monopoly on sweets, though, I’d be happy to consult with you about those.”

“Really?!”

I grip the bowl under my arms even more tightly. Maïne flinches back, startled, then nods quickly.

“First off, although I guess this is after you get things going, what’s your plan for when your monopoly on pound cake expires?”

“Is Mister Benno going to be getting in our way?”

Miss Freida always complains about how Lutz and Mister Benno are constantly monopolizing Maïne’s knowledge.

Maïne tilts her head thoughtfully. “Hmmm, I don’t know. I’m sure he’d be mad if I said this, but I don’t think he can? Honestly, I don’t think anything would change if I told him about my dessert recipes.”

“Why’s that?” “Well, Mister Benno’s connections with the nobility are still not very deep, so I don’t think he’d be able to find the ingredients or people with the skills to make them. I don’t think he’s got a path open to him that he could get sugar from, and if he can’t hire people away from the nobility, then he’s not going to find a cook like you, will he? I heard from Freida how the guildmaster hired you.”

I’m halfway dumbfounded to hear Maïne’s frank analysis of Benno, a man who by all reasonable descriptions is practically her guardian. Maïne, in her own way, seems to be thinking about who she should be telling things too. If this is the case, though, then this might be my chance to learn more of her recipes.

I glance up at her as I pour flour into my bowl. “How about you just open up your recipes to the public? I’d be happy to listen.”

“Yeah, if I didn’t know a cook as good as you I wouldn’t be able to make any of these things just by describing them. I really like how enthusiastic you are about learning, too, so I want to help you out too.”

Her words make me so happy that I have to keep a wordless shout of joy from springing from my throat. What she's saying, in other words, is that she recognizes my skill. She's not going to be telling her recipes to Benno, the man she owes so much to, but to me.

"...But, if I just tell them to you, then I don't make any money off of it, and there's all sorts of unfairness in that, so I'm in a kinda difficult situation."

Even if Maïne herself doesn't find profit to be that important, the world doesn't agree. Also, her recipes might cause all sorts of chaos in the rest of the world. She probably has ideas for other things besides food, too, things that have no precedent at all.

As I mix melted butter into the bowl, I decide to just ask her the question that's been on my mind for so long.

"So, Maïne. Who are you, really? Where in the world did you learn all these recipes?"

"...Ummm... a dream." Without thinking, I shoot her a threatening glare. She must be trying to make fun of me. "...What was that?" I say. She gives me a troubled sort of smile. "...It's true. Everything so far has just been me trying to eat things I've only ever tasted in a dream."

She sighs heavily, letting her eyes close halfway as she looks nostalgically off into the distance, smiling sadly. Seeing such a mature expression on her face makes me strangely anxious. She closes her eyes, briefly, then looks up at me, putting on the biggest, most childish grin she can. It's painfully obvious how fake that smile is.

"But I really do wanna just spread all my recipes eeeverywhere, so I want really good cooks like you to help me make them!"

Sensing that there's something she deeply doesn't want to talk about, I go back to stirring my batter, and follow along with where she's trying to steer the conversation.

"You can't make them yourself?"

"I mean, I'm weak, and I'm frail, and I don't have the tools, and I'm not

good enough at cooking, so I definitely can't actually make any of it myself. But if I have good cooks make them for me, then there's tons of recipes I want to share with the world. I just can't do it right now, though."

She waves her tiny hands around, letting her eyebrows droop pitifully. I glance at her thin, pale arms, recalling how she didn't have the strength to whip eggs or stir flour into a batter. She probably really can't do much cooking with those arms.

"Well, if you ever get a craving for something come see me. I'll be happy to make anything you want, if you show me how to do it."

My heart trembles with the idea of reproducing the recipes Maïne saw in her dreams.

Aaah, I'm looking forward to that! Just what in the world could be hidden in there?

Chapter 75: Interlude - Pound Cake Tasting Party

My name's Benno. I'm the owner of the Gilberta Company. I'm twenty-nine, and a bachelor.

After a long meeting at the merchants' guild, attended by every shopkeeper who not only owns a store in the city, but owns a big enough one that they have to pay more than the minimum tax, the old asshole that runs the guild looks around the room at each and every one of us before speaking.

"That's it for today, hm? Well then, I'm holding an exhibition in the large conference room for a new kind of dessert that I'm planning on selling soon. Feel free to stop by if you've got the time. I've made sure to have some ready for any attendants you've brought along as well, of course."

I stand up and start heading towards the conference room. The only people here are the owners of large shops. In other words, this is a room full of people who have the money to buy high-class desserts as well as discerning eyes for quality product. If that old bastard had tried throwing a sampling party at his home or at his shop, I don't actually know how many of us would have dragged ourselves all the way out there, so he's hosting it here, right after a meeting, close enough that walking there barely even stretches my legs. I'm almost mad at how well he pulled this off. That old man definitely pays attention.

Pound cake. The dessert that Maïne basically gave away the secret to. On top of that, this tasting party is something that Maïne just offhandedly suggested, which got that shitty old man's granddaughter all fired up.

That absolute idiot just won't stop! She just keeps yanking out product after product after market-destabilizing product! And she doesn't even realize just how much work I have to put in to prevent everything from falling apart! That thoughtless little...!

Because one typically wants to have a monopoly on their shop's signature merchandise, people have avoided throwing events like this to widely reveal their new products before they make it to market. If they wanted to build interest in a product before it reached shelves, they'd try to impress people by advertising whatever amazing inventor actually made the thing. That way, another shopkeeper couldn't just immediately copy the new product before it went up for sale.

What really grinds my gears is that sugar isn't really a thing that's widely circulated around here. Basically the only person who's managed to get any of the sugar that's coming out of Central is the guild master. Worse, since sweet things are "in" right now in the capital, the nobles here are clamoring for desserts. And on top of that, it's pretty obvious that this sampling party isn't just so that the guild master can show off, but so his granddaughter can do so too. That girl has the same nose for coin as her shitty grandfather.

"Welcome to the pound cake sampling party. Please, select the kinds of cake that most suit you, then place these tokens in the corresponding box."

When we enter the conference room, a few young boys and girls, wearing cloths over their faces, are lined up, handing three wooden slips to each of the guests as they walk in.

"You may vote for your favorite three times if you choose, or you may split your votes across three different varieties of cake."

I palm my stack of tokens as I glance around the room. All of the people already circulating through the room have the same cloths draped over their faces, making it easy to immediately tell who's staffing the party and who's a guest. Not many guests have made it here yet, and those that have are still warily looking around the room, so nobody has yet to start reaching for any cake.

"So, this is pound cake, huh..."

On tables in the center of the room, pieces of cake have been neatly arranged, each table containing a different variety of cake. The cake's been

cut into bite-sized pieces, but there's more varieties of it than I'd been expecting.

"Oh, Mister Benno!"

"Master Benno, sir!"

The two children waving their hands at me are the ringleader of this fiasco, Maïne, and my apprentice, Lutz. Lutz is wearing my shop's apprentice uniform, but Maïne's wearing the same clothing as the people running the party. I casually wave at the two of them, beckoning them over, then when Maïne gets within arm's reach I chop her on the head.

"Maïne, what do you think you're doing here?"

"Ow ow ow! I'm just helping out, okay?"

As she rubs her head, asking if it wasn't obvious based on what she's wearing, I reach out and yank off the cloth covering her face.

"Go get changed, now. I don't want any of the merchants that are about to come strolling in here to learn what you look like. Why do you think I'm trying to keep the existence of the paper-inventing, hairpin-making little girl a secret, hm? Are you trying to bring everything down on my shop? Is this some sort of flashy self-promotion, perhaps?"

"Nrgh... I'll go get changed. Lutz, stay here, okay?"

I return her cloth to her, and she quickly heads out of the conference room. Watching her leave, I let out a small sigh. Maïne's unusually clever for a girl her age, and picks up on things very quickly. She knows quite a bit that she ordinarily wouldn't. Despite that, though, she is terrible at paying attention to her surroundings. This is probably pretty normal for a kid, but it's really obvious how little she thinks about how much she stands out and how completely unconcerned she is about how dangerous that might be.

As much as possible, it's best that she doesn't stand out at all. If a kid without any serious backing stands out too much, it doesn't turn out well for them at all. For example, my father died and I inherited his shop just about when I came of age. Everyone looked down on me for being

inexperienced, and all sorts of awful things happened as a result of that. A kid fresh out of her baptismal ceremony would just be meat to them.

“You are... quite strict with her, sir.”

“Lutz, if you want to protect that girl, remember this: without the backing of a merchant, Maïne, who doesn’t even have a noble guardian at the temple yet, is in an extremely precarious position.”

When I think of how joining the temple will prolong Maïne’s life, as well as how it’ll let her form new relationships with the nobility, it’s clearly the right decision for her. However, even trying to imagine what might happen if she keeps going on like she has for the last couple of years gives me an amazingly piercing headache.

“Huh, but, aren’t you her guardian...?”

“Technically, I am the responsible party for Maïne’s Workshop, which allows me to be treated as something like her patron, but that’s a pretty flimsy connection. If I’d been able to make her my apprentice like I did with you, I’d have more I can do, but it’s already been decided that she’s joining the temple, and my arms don’t yet reach quite that far. Unlike how things are now, even you are going to have a hard time keeping an eye on her. It’s best that she doesn’t do anything to stand out.” “Mm, I see. You’re very right.” “Even if that weren’t the case, that girl thinks in ways that I just don’t understand, and the instant I take my eyes off of her she’s gone and done something strange again. So, I think a little strictness is probably in order.” “Aah... that makes quite a bit of sense.”

Lutz nods calmly, exactly like Mark does, and I suppress a chuckle. After he was baptized and started working as my apprentice, he very quickly started to change his speech patterns, and started mimicking Mark’s posture and mannerisms. I’d bet that Maïne told him to use Mark as a role model at some point.

Lutz’s upbringing, which was so completely different from a merchant’s kid’s, left him pretty lacking in a lot of areas when it comes to being a merchant. He’s been frantically trying to cover up all of the ways he’s different from the other apprentices. I’m very well aware that he’s been

studying both me and Mark intently, copying even the tiniest little things from us.

Kid's got ambition. I like that a lot.

"Lutz, what do you think of pound cake? As a commodity."

"...I think it would undoubtedly sell quite well among the nobility. It'll probably get a really good reception." "And what are you basing that on? I'm pretty sure you don't know anything about what the nobles' tastes are like or what they usually eat, do you?"

I'd tried to cut deep with that question, but Lutz seems particularly unperturbed as he quickly answers.

"Umm, I heard from Maïne that since Freida is going to be living in the nobles' quarter, the guild master did everything he could to collect things that the nobility use in their daily lives. This seems to include their cook, who he hired away from a nobleman. That's why I think that if Freida and that cook are both confident that it'll sell, then it'll sell."

"Hmm, alright then."

I actually hadn't heard much about the guild master's house. I know that he'd put a lot of money into it, but I didn't know that he'd gathered things to mimic the nobles' daily lives. My eyes widen a little in amazement at this information. Looks like I can't underestimate the value of the information that kids might share between themselves.

"Lutz, I'm back!"

"Oh, Maïne!"

Maïne returns, wearing the apprentice's clothes for my shop. Now, if anyone looks at the three of us, nobody will think anything's odd at all.

"Master Benno," says Lutz, pointing at the cake on the far right table, "this is the pound cake with nothing else added to it. This is the kind that I tried before."

He looks like he's about to start drooling, maybe because he's thinking about what it tasted like last time. His eyes are basically glued to the line

of cake, glimmering with raw expectation.

“Miss Ilse is really enthusiastic about self-improvement, so she’s made it way better than last time. And then also, the cake on this table has ferigine added to it. This table’s cake has honey in it, and that one has walnuts. The one over there is the latest invention, and it’s got tea leaves added to it. Please, try some!”

She’s puffed out her chest proudly, as if all of this was her own achievement. I snort, looking down at her, somehow entirely unamused.

“And this is because you just told them about all of these varieties, didn’t you?”

“Urgh... I, I traded sugar for these, so I wasn’t just giving them ideas for free.”

It seems like she somehow managed to trade that information for some sugar for her own personal use. I’m caught between wanting to praise her shrewdness for actually being a little merchant-like and wanting to smack her on the head for giving them such incredibly valuable information.

“Also, the only ones I told them about were this ferigine one and the tea leaf one. Most of this is because of Miss Ilse’s research, so it’s not like I came up with all of this.”

She looks away, pouting, then reaches for a piece of cake.

“You should try this, Mister Benno. It’s good!”

She pops the piece of cake in her mouth and savors the taste. Lutz reaches for his own slice, too. Based on the astonished voices that I’m hearing, it’s pretty obvious that it’s actually good. I take a bite as well.

What is this?!

I could tell from the moment I picked it up that it’s soft and fluffy, and when I put it in my mouth it crumbles and almost melts away. It looks like bread at first glance, but no bread I’ve ever seen has been this tender. Bread is something you dip in soup to eat.

I’m also shocked at how I’ve never tasted sweetness like this before. It’s

very sweet, but unlike things that have been soaked in honey, it's not a concentrated, cloying sweetness, nor is it anything like the sweetness of a fruit, but instead a gentle sweetness that spreads all throughout my mouth. That sweetness, mixed with the savory taste of butter, stimulates my appetite and leaves me wanting more.

"It's tasty, right?"

Maine looks up at me, eyes glimmering, probably looking for some sort of praise. Honest praise like that just kinda annoys me, so I ignore her, reaching for a piece of the ferigine cake. It's as light and tender as the first piece, but the aroma of ferigine fills my mouth as well. The taste is refreshing, and it goes down easily. Just by adding a little bit of flavor to it, my impression has changed dramatically. I glance up, looking at the other tables.

"Miss Ilse is really great, isn't she?"

I brush off Maine as she talks about how great someone else's cook is, and move to the next table. I pick up a piece of the honey-laden cake and pop it into my mouth. Unlike the other pieces I've eaten so far, this cake is a bit heavier, and the sweetness is much more concentrated. It's a more familiar taste, and this feels like it's the sweetest cake out of all of the ones I've eaten so far. This'll probably be the one that's most popular with kids, who tend to put sweetness above all else.

"It's sweet, but it's not too heavy, right?"

The next is the one with walnuts. It's the most familiar-looking cake of the bunch, since it resembles bread with walnuts in it. However, the texture is entirely unlike the bread that I normally eat. The cake itself is far lighter, giving the impression that the firm nuts are floating in it. The tender cake quickly melts away in my mouth, leaving only the nuts behind. I think this kind of mouth feel would probably be good if I got used to it, but I don't really like it all that much.

"Hey, Mister Benno. Answer me, please?"

"Shut up. You're too loud."

I hush Maïne, who's been circling restlessly and chirping incessantly at me like the noisiest baby bird, and move on to the final table. The fact that I'm told it has tea leaves in it gives me momentary pause, but when I hesitantly take a bite, the flavor of it really hits me. Unlike the walnuts, the leaves have been thoroughly ground up, so I don't notice them at all. It definitely tastes like tea, but also like a sweet dessert, which is something entirely new to me. The sweetness isn't as strong, but it's still delicious. This, I think, is going to be the most popular with men. At least, it's my favorite.

"Which are you going to vote for, Mister Benno?"

Every single one of these cakes is an eye-poppingly fantastic delicacy. These are, without a doubt, going to spread like wildfire amongst the nobility. This is the kind of taste that everyone will crave. It would not be an empty exaggeration to say that there's a huge difference between these and the desserts already on the market.

"Hey, Maïne."

"What is it, sir?" "Why'd you give this recipe to the guild master?"

For someone trying to break into noble society, this recipe would have been a massive weapon in my arsenal. I would have wanted this. When I glare down at Maïne, though, she just blinks, tilting her head to the side.

"But I gave it to Miss Ilse, though..."

"That old bastard's the one selling it. Same thing either way."

This pound cake is only going to strengthen that shitty old man's clout amongst the nobles. Maïne frowns, concernedly, looking like she's maybe picked up on my frustration.

"Mister Benno, you always seem to have a really bad relationship with the guild master, don't you? Why's that?"

It suddenly occurs to me that I might not have actually told her that story, but as I think about that, fragments of unpleasant memories flash across my mind.

“When I was growing up, he always had it out for my family’s shop, but when my dad died, that utter asshole tried to get my mom to be his second wife so he could absorb the shop too.”

One day, when my father had gone out travelling to my uncle’s shop to do some business, he was attacked by a thief, who wanted his money, and was killed in the process. Since he was still near the city when this happened, they were able to recover his corpse, but it was cut up so badly that my mother locked herself away for a while after she saw it. And then that old bastard just gleefully waltzed right in on her in the midst of her grief.

“Huh? Th... the guild master wanted her to be his second wife?”

“Yeah. She refused, of course, and then after that he started doing one little thing after another to harass us. It’s still going on now! Remember how much trouble we had getting you registered with the guild? How he tried to find any excuse to reject your application?” “A~ahh...”

Maïne and Lutz both grimace, remembering the times when they’d gotten tangled up in this mess. That shitty old man doesn’t just hurt me, he goes after everyone around me, too.

“Now, if you had to constantly deal with the kind of person who’d come up to you right when your lover dies and, with a big smile on his face, introduce you to his daughter, or, worse, constantly try to pawn off his sons, who are much older than me, on your little sisters who haven’t even come of age yet, do you think you’d be able to maintain a nice, friendly relationship?”

If I were to talk about business too, I’d have all sorts of stories about the unreasonable demands he’s piled on me, but Maïne won’t get much meaning out of those kinds of war stories. It’s good enough to just make sure she knows how terrible of a person that old bastard is.

“...Ummm, I guess, depending on your point of view, that means that the Gilberta Company is really highly-valued, isn’t it? I’m not saying that the guild master isn’t causing you trouble with how pushy he’s being, though.”

She avoided replying directly, but it seems that she basically understands

how troublesome that guild master is.

“So,” I say, “why did you give that troublesome guild leader your recipe?”

“I mean, if you really want to know... all I wanted to really wanted to do was make sweets with Freida, like I’d promised her.” “But then you made a contract, didn’t you?” “It’s just a one-year exclusivity agreement, you know? Is that really something to get so mad at me about?”

Putting a time restriction on that contract was remarkably well thought-out for one of Maïne’s deals, but I’m not at all assured that she’ll be able to enforce that. I wonder if Freida’s going to be able to coax her into extending the monopoly deadline indefinitely?

“...So you’re really going to open the recipe to the public after one year?”

“Yes, sir. I don’t want sweets to be monopolized. I want lots of people to be making them!”

Even if she’s saying that she only sold them monopoly rights to the recipe for one year, though, if nobody can actually get their hands on sugar, then the guild master’s shop is probably still going to effectively have a monopoly on it. I’ve got a bad feeling that, even though I don’t want to be left behind more than I already have, there’s so many more ways they can pull further ahead.

“Say, you mentioned that you know other recipes, didn’t you? You sure you don’t want to sell those to me?”

“...Even if I did sell them to you, you wouldn’t be able to do anything with them, right? You don’t have any sugar or any cooks.”

She stares at me blankly, head tilted.

“What do you mean?”

“All of the recipes for sweets that I know require sugar. But, more importantly, the most important thing I need is a really good cook. If they’re not as skilled as someone who’s worked in a noble house, then even if I told them what the recipe is, they wouldn’t immediately be able to recreate it.” “Why a noble house...?” “Because they need to be able to use

an oven whenever they want. I don't think that there's ovens anywhere except bakeries, so they're not really spreading, are they?"

There aren't very many households that have their own personal ovens. Generally, unless you're very rich or a gourmand, there's no real need for one. So, in other words, the guild master's house has an oven, and they also have someone who is capable of using it well.

"Oh my," snickers a child from behind me, "it looks like I might be able to buy all of Maïne's recipes before you can even get all of your things together. Our cook, after all, is always hungry for new recipes."

I turn to look, and see the guild master's daughter, with hair the color of spring flowers gathered into bunches over each of her ears.

"Good afternoon, Mister Benno. Good afternoon, Lutz."

The way her eyes are so full of challenge when she looks up at me is exactly like that old bastard. I kept trying to tell myself that if that shitty old man disappeared one day, my life would get a little easier, but I can't underestimate this girl. She's got the same nose for money her grandfather does, the way she's been getting so close to Maïne.

Despite the fact that Maïne has been increasingly vigilant against me, when she sees Freida, she smiles widely and waves at her, greeting her in a friendly way. I can't help but be a little irritated at just how well they're getting along.

"Freida! How's the party going?"

"Spectacularly, thanks to your help. Everyone is loving the pound cake. And, since you've been talking about releasing the recipe in a year's time, there's no small number of people looking forward to that as well!"

How many times do I have to tell this idiot to be more careful until she gets it!

I've managed to trick her a few times, but every single time she unhappily puffs out her cheeks and then still follows through. She doesn't watch out for the kinds of expressions people are making, how much attention they're paying, or even whether or not they're testing her. She

lacks so much wariness that I'm actually concerned. I'm convinced that the concept of wariness just fell out of her head at some point and she never bothered to go looking for it.

Even still, as an adult watching from the sidelines, there's no way that I can intrude on two little girls having a friendly chat with each other. Unless she makes some sort of promise or gets caught up in something strange, the only thing I can do is stand here with Lutz, glaring at the two of them.

"Lutz," I say. "How can that girl be so friendly with someone who used the fact that she was on her deathbed to swindle her?"

"...I don't think I know how she thinks most of the time. Also, I don't really like Freida all that much."

It's plainly written on his face how much he wants Freida to stay away from Maïne. It's difficult to tell if the desire to monopolize her that I can see in his green eyes is because she's his most important friend, or if this has already blossomed into romance. Either way, when I see how much Lutz cares for Maïne, I can't help but remember bittersweet memories of my lover from years ago that I'd put aside when she'd died, which leaves me with an itchy, uncomfortable feeling.

"You're in for a rough ride, Lutz," I say. "Huh?"

"Keeping hold of Maïne isn't going to be an easy task at all."

I rustle his hair as I encourage him. He looks up at me, green eyes gleaming, and nods slowly.

"Maïne, how's everything tasting?"

A sturdily-built woman approaches, greeting Maïne as if she knows her from somewhere. A sweet smell rolls off of her body, and she has a cloth covering her face to show that she's part of the staff. Lutz and I look at her, on our guards, wondering who she is. Maïne, on the other hand, smiles broadly, running over to her.

"It's amazingly delicious, of course!" says Maïne. "I'd tried a little before, but you've made a lot of improvements to the cake with the tea in it! I

knew you could do it.”

“Glad to hear it,” says the woman, grinning broadly at Maïne’s praise.

It seems that this woman is the cook who works at the guild master’s house and the person who made this pound cake. I size her up, as any merchant would, studying the cook who was poised to make the guild master a lot of money. She looks back at me.

“Ah, you’re Mister Benno, then?”

“Yeah, I am, and?”

I don’t really understand why the guild master’s cook would be calling to me. Did Maïne do something again? As I scowl, Ilse looks me up and down.

“...Hmm.”

The look in her eyes when she studies me, like she’s trying to figure out who she’s up against, reminds me a lot of the guild master. I narrow my eyes. If I’m going up against a young girl like Freida, her immaturity might cause me to unconsciously hold back, but against an adult, I need exercise no such restraint.

“Ah, so you’re the one who’s trying to tie Maïne up and hog all of her knowledge to herself, are you?”

“Hm? Well, some job I’m doing, then. You’re the one with her pound cake recipe, aren’t you?”

It’s true that I’d like to monopolize whatever information I can, but Maïne refuses to just sit there and let me do it. Ilse describes it as tying her up, but even the stuff that accidentally falls out of Maïne’s mouth has the potential to throw the market into chaos, so, honestly, being careful about parceling out what she knows is for the best.

“I’m generally the one who has to pick up after this kid,” I say, “but you’ve managed to snatch up whatever tasty things she thinks up, haven’t you?”

For Maïne’s sake, I’ve gathered all sorts of information, arranged for

contract magic in order to strengthen her connection with Lutz, formed a papermaker's association to hide her identity, and done so many other things in the shadows. That thoughtless girl isn't causing the guild master any trouble at all. No, that all falls on me.

"But Mister Benno," says Maïne, pouting, "you're always ripping me off, aren't you?" I flick her forehead. "The money I saved on the rinsham by ripping you off went straight into those two magical contracts, you know?"

"Huh?" she says. "...Two magical contracts?" says Freida.

The two girls look up at me with the same foolish expression, their mouths hanging open in shock. I shrug.

"Seriously, you don't even know what I go through..."

"I don't particularly care what you're going through," says the cook. "Maïne's said that she's only going to hand her recipes over to people that she thinks can actually make them. You can do whatever you want with whatever else she's got, but her recipes are mine."

This is a declaration of war. It seems like even that old geezer's staff have it out for me.

"Hand them over, huh?"

As if I'd let the guild master keep a monopoly on pound cake forever! Over the next year, before that monopoly agreement expires, I need to find a good cook. I can probably get a lead on sugar if I lean on some of my distant relatives, so it'll take some doing but I'll probably manage to get my hands on some of that.

As I continue to glare at Ilse, countless calculations flying about in my head, Maïne tugs urgently on my sleeve, a worried expression on her face.

"Mister Benno, Mister Benno! It'll be really hard to find a cook, you know? If you don't have an intermediary you can use to get in touch with the nobility, then it'll be kinda impossible."

"Why would I need an intermediary? All I'm looking for is someone who can use an oven and is into self-improvement, right?"

All that the whole needing someone good enough to work in a noble house thing boils down to is that I need someone who can get good at using an oven. It's not like I actually need someone who's actually, literally worked in a noble house themselves.

"Maïne," I say, "you know how you keep saying that since there's no books you're going to make them yourself? So, what would you do if you didn't have a cook?"

"I'd... train one myself?" "Exactly."

I'll get the facilities ready, find a good cook from somewhere in this city, and then train them up and get them specialized specifically in making pastries.

Chapter 76: Interlude - Master Benno and I

My name is Mark. I am the assistant to Master Benno, the manager of the Gilberta Company. I believe I'm just about thirty-seven years of age, if I recall correctly. When one is as old as I am, one's age isn't something that is clearly remembered.

I have served the Gilberta Company since its previous manager was in charge. If you include my time as an apprentice, they have employed me for thirty years of my life. The year I started apprenticing at this shop as a dalua was the year that Master Benno was born, so the years have passed amazingly quickly.

There are two types of apprenticeships amongst merchants and tradesmen: dalua and dapla. To explain it succinctly, a dalua makes a contract with the shop's manager to simply work at the shop for a fixed term, while a dapla studies towards being able to assist in the management and affairs of the shop itself. There are substantial differences in the contract fees and the contents of the contract themselves, but at this moment there is no need for a thorough explanation.

The Gilberta Company, essentially, employs the children of other shops as dalua. The sons and daughters of merchants spend a certain amount of their lives studying at other shops. The particular duration of this stay is a matter of negotiation between the shop's management and the child's parents. I believe the most common arrangements are between three and four years, perhaps.

The reasons for doing this are manifold. By working at another shop, the child's field of view is widened, they're placed in a position where they are put to work, they're removed from a place where they may be coddled, they make friends with other children who will eventually become the next generation of shopkeepers, and so on, but most importantly they serve as metaphorical bridges built between shops.

My original employment at the Gilberta Company was as a dalua, with the intent that when my contract expired I would return to my family's shop. However, during my employment, my father passed away, and my eldest brother took his place as the shop's manager. His attitudes towards commerce, however, were too different from my own, so rather than returning to my family's shop, I chose to renew my contract as a dalua several times. Eventually, when I came of age at fifteen years old I signed a contract to become a dapla instead.

The term of apprenticeship for a dapla is eight years. In essence, when a child finishes their apprenticeship as a dalua at another shop, sometime between the ages of ten and twelve, they transition towards becoming a dapla instead. By the time they are twenty years of age, they have become capable of being entrusted with the affairs of the shop in place of the manager.

Since I had begun my apprenticeship as a dapla so late, I spent the first eight years of my adult life in renewed study. Of course, although I may say that it was eight years of study, in truth, I had already worked as a dalua at the shop for eight years, so I was already very much familiar with the operations of the Gilberta Company. Thanks to the good graces of the previous manager, I was not paid an apprentice's wage as would be typical of a dapla, but was instead paid as much as any other adult employee of the shop. Thus, the prospect of eight additional years of study was not at all particularly painful. I was thrilled at how much better my treatment was compared to when I had been a dalua, and I threw myself into my work with zeal.

However, not all remained well. When my period of apprenticeship as a dapla was on the verge of completion, the shop's manager unfortunately passed away. Master Benno, at the time, had only just reached adulthood himself, and there was much concern that he was not yet ready to manage the shop on his own. Of the dalua who had formed a contract with the previous manager, there was no small number who declined to reestablish their contracts under Master Benno.

As my own term of employment had not yet finished, in order to ensure

that I could continue to work at the Gilberta Company, I proposed to my family that our own shop could lend their assistance to Master Benno. However, my eldest brother, who was still in charge of the shop, not only refused to offer any support, but went so far as to sneer at the death of the previous manager and sever all ties between my family's shop and the Gilberta Corporation.

I wonder, how I might best describe the anger I felt at that moment? The instant that I swore an oath to myself to say my farewells to my family and remain at the Gilberta Company to support it and its new manager to the bitter end remains exceptionally vivid in my memory, even to this day.

When my term of apprenticeship as dapla to Master Benno ended, he asked me if I would be returning to my family's shop. I, however, had already severed ties with my family and thus had nowhere I could go. Moreover, the shop that needed my efforts the most was still the Gilberta Company. After I expressed this to him, the two of us threw ourselves headlong into the hard work of reviving the company. We quickly returned it to its original state, and shortly thereafter were able to grow it yet larger. The work I did in the shadows to use my own family's shop as a mere stepping stone along the path to the Gilberta Company's resurgence is a story best left untold.

The eldest daughter of the previous manager, Miss Corinna, became married. Master Benno, however, lost all interest in marriage after his lover, Liese, passed away. I as well never married; while I was so absorbed in my work, my marriageable years passed me by without my noticing. Life, it seems, never goes as one might think it would.

Because our work is going so well, and because Master Benno has decided that Miss Corinna's children will inherit the shop, I can now say that our days are free of any problems that might imperil the future of the shop.

Now then; as there is a meeting today which must be attended by the owners of all large shops, Master Benno is currently absent. As such, each of the important matters that need immediate decisions made have been brought to me.

“Mister Mark, the rinsham workshop has contacted us to let us know that their shipment will be delayed,” says one employee. “I see. The shipment of leve they were expecting was delayed as well, so it’s only to be expected. Please contact the foreman and ask him to have whatever they have already completed delivered immediately, and to finish the rest of it as soon as they can.”

“Um, Mister Mark,” says another employee. “We’ve received a commission request for Miss Corinna from Baron Bron’s daughter.” “It’s rare for her to commission a garment in the summer. We should hurry, I think. Please deliver that to Miss Corinna immediately.”

Some time passes, slightly more busily than usual, after which Master Benno returns to the shop, carrying Maïne in his arms.

“Mark, let’s talk. Come!”

He walks quickly towards his office in the back, eyes blazing with determination. Maïne looks perplexed. Lutz hurries along behind them, out of breath. I suddenly have a bad feeling that I’m about to be handed another unreasonable request.

So far, I’ve had to procure the materials and ingredients for the rinsham workshop, run around like mad to ensure a market for the rinsham would exist so that I could provide guarantees to the craftsmen, scour the entire town to find the tools and materials that Maïne and Lutz requested as part of their paper-making experiments, aid in the efforts to reduce tension with the parchment makers’ association, and effectively do absolutely everything to establish the full-scale workshop for paper production... Now that I think about it, it seems that this last year has seen quite a few unreasonable tasks forced onto me. What might this next thing be now?

“Mark, we’re going to train cooks to make desserts! Get ready!”

Train cooks to make desserts? The suggestion that has just flown from his mouth has absolutely nothing to do with any of our business thus far. I have an astoundingly bad feeling about this. There is no doubt: the abruptness of this must have come as the result of something Maïne has done. As for Master Benno, his eyes are glimmering with determination as

he digs through stacks of wooden boards, verifying something or other. I am pleased to see him so energetic, but at the same time I feel like this may have terrible impact on those around him.

“When you speak of dessert cooks, what in the world do you plan to have them make?”

“Ask Maïne.”

Ah, so this truly is Maïne’s doing? It seems that, somehow, another difficult problem has reared its head.

Originally, the Gilberta Company was founded so that Master Benno’s great-grandmother, Gilberta, could sell her wares. Essentially, the wife would make her wares at the company workshop, while the husband handled the sales. The husband’s name has always been the one registered as the owner of the company, but the true line of ownership has ultimately been matrilineal.

The Gilberta Company’s core clientele is the rich people of the city, but the designs that Master Benno’s mother came up with attracted the attention of some of the lower-ranked nobility. As such, the company has been able to gain a small amount of influence in noble society. Its ability to do business with the nobility has only come about within the past decade. It is a very recent thing. As Miss Corinna’s fashion sense continues to hold some interest in noble society, the Gilberta Company’s position could be said to be very stable.

In other words, the Gilberta Company trades in clothing, accessories, and other such beauty products.

The rinsham that Maïne brought to us is an excellent beauty product that has become very highly valued among our clients, and the hairpins that Miss Corinna’s workshop will soon be making have already gathered quite some interest amongst the people of the city. Miss Corinna herself has expressed profound joy over being granted the rights to produce the hairpins, saying that if one were to adjust the quality of the thread and the designs, it is likely that they would be well-received amongst the wives and daughters of the nobility.

However, on the other hand, the plant-based paper that Maïne brought to us caused the Gilberta Company to stray somewhat from its path, and the training of dessert cooks is something entirely different than any of the business that we've been a part of to date. Just what in the world could Master Benno be thinking, I wonder?

"What I'm trying to tell you," says Maïne, "is that if you don't have any sugar, then this entire thing is pointless!"

"Even if they don't have any sugar they can still bake bread. That's good practice for using an oven, isn't it?" "But bread workshops already exist, which means that a bread-maker's association already exists, which means that we're going to have another battle over people's vested interests! Even if it's just practice! And on top of that, weren't you planning on hiring away people who already work at bread workshops, too?!" "If you're always so concerned about vested interests, then how can you ever get anything new off the ground?!"

Master Benno sits in his chair. Across from him, Maïne is on a chair of her own, standing on her knees so that her eye level is the same as his. Watching the two of them go back and forth like this reminds me strongly of how he used to argue with Miss Liese. I wonder if it would be better to describe them as being on too good terms for a quarrel to shake, or as them having such trust in each other to the point where they can have fights like this without caring too much?

It has seemed that, as of late, Master Benno has never been quite so lively as he is when he is fighting with Maïne over matters of business. Perhaps it's because cornering a skillful speaker like Maïne in an argument gives him the same joy as when he was able to best Miss Liese in one of there quarrels. This, incidentally, did not happen very often.

"Lutz," I say, "perhaps we should leave those two to their own devices. Could you please describe to me what happened to bring this about? Why did Master Benno suddenly decide that he needed to train cooks to make desserts?"

"Ah, yes," he replies.

Lutz, who had been staring at the the two of them as they fought, startles, straightens up, and begins to explain to me what had happened. Since he is so used to being thrown around at Maïne's whims, his mind is remarkably agile at switching to a new focus. He is capable of quietly absorbing any information thrown at him and has a very patient personality. He could be described as someone with talents that are hard to come by. He smoothly recounts the events of the day in an easy-to-understand order, as if he had done this all his life.

According to his explanation, after the meeting at the merchants' guild, a tasting party was held for pound cake, during which it seems that Master Benno got into a fight with the guild master's cook. He declared, says Lutz, that if he does not have a cook capable of making sweets, then there's nothing stopping him from training one himself.

Master Benno does not like to lose, and it seems that in this case he was simply unable to bear it.

"What Maïne was saying," says Lutz, "is that in order to make desserts, one needs a cook capable of skillfully using an oven. They must also have an enquiring mind and not be afraid to spend a lot of time experimenting with the recipe to make it more delicious. Master Benno was originally thinking that he would be able to find someone who had already mastered the use of ovens at a bread workshop, but Maïne said that since they would wind up making things other than bread, it seems that unless they're enthusiastic something new, it wouldn't go particularly well..."

After Lutz finishes explaining the circumstances, I finally start to see the points of compromise that could be reached in the argument between Master Benno and Maïne.

"It seems that Master Benno has determined that these desserts would be suitable for selling to the nobility, then?"

"Yes, but—" "Lutz, you cannot say 'but'. When Master Benno is determined to do something, we have no choice but to follow along."

This may reflect my own particular partiality towards Master Benno, but I believe that he has an excellent sense for matters of business. I cannot

recall any instances where he has decided something will sell and, after pursuing that goal with all of his power, failed to make a profit.

I clap my hands together twice, drawing both Master Benno and Maïne's attention to me.

"Master Benno, when you say that you are going to be training dessert cooks, might I ask how long you believe that would take? Would such an action be profitable?" He quietly nods. "...Yeah, it'd be profitable. I'm planning on hiring someone who's already able to use an oven from a bread workshop and using them to teach other people, so that shouldn't take that much time."

His eyes are full of self confidence, and his face shows that he's not seeing even the tiniest sliver of a chance for failure.

"As Maïne has just said that one cannot make her desserts without sugar, you must believe it is possible for you to acquire some, then?"

"It's been a while since I talked to my relatives, but if I reach out to them, I think I'll be able to manage something, even if it'll be a little bit tough. I think Uncle Emil might have a bit of influence in Central? I could also have Otto get in touch with his friends from his trading days. In the meantime, I can have the workers make bread in order to get them used to working with ovens." "Hm," I reply. "it certainly does not seem entirely impossible."

It seems that because it is impossible to secure victory when there are fundamentally zero chances for success, Master Benno has been considering how he might acquire sugar from the moment Maïne had started talking about desserts.

Arranging for a workshop and purchasing ovens is a tedious and complicated process, but is not exceptionally difficult. It does seem that, after all, the most significant problem that must be dealt with will be negotiating with those businesses that already have vested interest in this field. I dare say that the guild master will likely have objections of his own, as well. Thinking back on all of the strife that had happened with the parchment makers' association when we wished to start selling plant-

based paper makes my eyes narrow. These disputes that have happened over these things outside of our core business, like making paper or training cooks, are exceedingly difficult compared to the rest of my work.

“Maïne,” I say, “might you have some idea as to how we might avoid strife with the bread makers’ association, similar to the solution you came up with to ensure we did not encroach on the profits of the parchment makers’ association?”

“Huh?! You want me to think that up?!”

Master Benno is a man who prefers to solve his problems by breaking through them with sheer force and fundamentally dislikes compromise. Maïne, who is unskilled at direct conflict and thus avoids them as much as possible, is much more suited to finding a good compromise. Not to mention, the training of dessert cooks is so far out of my area of expertise that I don’t have the background information required to find any points of common ground.

“Of the four of us here, I believe you must be the one most familiar with the topic of dessert cooks, are you not? Because you are thus much more suited than Master Benno to find points of common ground, please, help us determine if there is any view that would allow both parties to still profit.”

I am fully aware that this is an unreasonable demand to be making of a young girl who has only barely just been baptized, but I, along with Master Benno, do not think of Maïne as an ordinary little girl.

“Eh?! Umm... common ground? I mean, you’re, kinda putting me on the spot, but, uh... if you want both sides to profit, umm...”

“Let me see... perhaps there might be some other kind of bread besides the bread being produced now, or something one might use an oven for besides making bread...”

As she broods, I offer her a couple of suggestions, reframing the ideas from her paper compromise so that they might apply to bread. Nothing at all comes to my mind, of course, but since Maïne is a constant font of strange ideas, I believe that there must be something that she will be able

to think of.

Confirming my hypothesis, Maïne quickly turns her head to face me, her dark blue hair swinging behind her. Her golden eyes glimmer as she shoots her left hand straight up into the air.

“There is something! I’ve really been craving ‘Italian’ food!”

“...‘Italian’?”

She’s brought out a word I’ve never heard before. Both Master Benno and Lutz tilt their heads, looking at her funnily, but Maïne seems to not care in the slightest as she launches into the topic.

“Even if we don’t have any sugar, then if there’s a style of cooking that uses an oven, then that’s still good practice, right? So if we can make things like ‘pizza’, ‘gratin’ dishes, or ‘lasagna’, then that’ll definitely work. ...Ah! Also, also, you can cook meat in an oven, and also make things like ‘quiches’ and ‘pies’, too. Aaah, I can’t wait!”

Maïne cheerfully lists off name after name of possible dishes, but based on the fact that she mentioned cooking meat in the oven, I can’t imagine that the rest of them are any sort of dessert. She looks off into the distance, eyes sparkling, looking so entranced by the idea of food that she might start drooling at any moment. Lutz, standing next to me, lets out a small groan.

“Uh oh. She’s going wild again.”

“Oh?” I reply. “She’s imagining something that she really wants. Once she sets her mind on something, she blazes forward at full speed... I don’t know if Master Benno’s going to be able to win, huh?”

The way he’s groaning makes it easy to understand that Maïne’s rampages often involve forcefully dragging him around to do things. She and Master Benno are very much alike, it seems. Once they have an objective in mind, they blaze directly towards it, perhaps not even realizing the hardships they may cause others around them in the process.

“Mister Benno,” she says, “let’s just give up on desserts. We should make a ‘restaurant’... ah, um, a kind of high-class place where you can eat food.”

“Hey, wait! You can’t just declare that we’re giving up like that!” “Oh, once we get sugar, we can also make ‘Italian’ desserts there too. It’s fine! Let’s make ‘Italian’.” “What about that is fine?!”

As Lutz feared, Master Benno appears to be losing. I realize just how similar Lutz and my situations are, with how he is dragged around by Maïne and how I am dragged around by Master Benno. I shed a tear for him, in my mind.

“Lutz, you must strengthen your heart. Do not let yourself simply be dragged around. You need to learn to predict when she might start to run wild. If you can turn things around before you get dragged into them, your life will be much easier.”

“Mister Mark...?” “There’s a knack for everything, even getting dragged into things.”

Lutz looks up at me, his green eyes shining with pure admiration. Looking down at him, I silently swear to myself that I will train him to the best of my capabilities so that no matter what unreasonable things he and Maïne find themselves doing, he will be able to bear it fully.

The entire time that the two of us were sharing our moment of appreciation for each others’ hardships, Maïne has not stopped talking. She is currently describing reason after reason as to why establishing an eatery is superior to simply starting a workshop.

“What I’m saying is that if you can cook anything, not just sweets, then that’s way more marketable, you know? And if you’re offering the food that the workers make for practice to real customers, then not only is the food not going to waste, but the workers themselves will be way more motivated, right? And then if you get to a point where they can start making sweets, then before you start selling them to the nobility, then you can have your customers sample them first, and use their feedback to make it even better!”

As Maïne lists her arguments, with levels of both persuasiveness and expression that one wouldn’t think would come out of the mouth of a child, Lutz looks up at me, eyebrows lowered, looking concerned.

“I... when I hear how passionate she is, I can’t help but start thinking that she might actually be right,” he says. I hum thoughtfully, nodding. “The ability to make someone want to buy what you’re selling is a much sought-after talent amongst merchants.” Lutz shrugs, giving me a small smile. “In Maïne’s case though, it’s a talent she doesn’t actually use at all unless it’s for something she wants.”

“Take care to watch how she says things to convince others of what she’s saying. Remember, everything around you can be an example to learn from.”

The persuasive power to make your opponent believe what you do is a very attractive ability, but ultimately, if Lutz is to manage a shop in the future, he cannot live a life of merely being dragged along by Maïne’s zeal.

“All that aside, Lutz. Is Maïne all right? I can’t help but wonder if she might be a little too zealous...”

“Aah! Maïne! Calm down a little!”

As soon as he says that, Maïne stops talking, and flops over onto the table, resting her head on its surface. It seems that she really has overdone it. Even still, it seems that she has yet more to say. While laying on the top, she starts mumbling, continuing her previous thought.

“There’s a huge difference between what rich people eat and what the nobility eat, you know. If you can provide tasty food, I think that people will absolutely come to eat it, even if it’s a little pricey. Definitely.”

“A huge difference? Where in the world would you have learned about what nobles eat... the guild master, huh?” “See? You’re interested too, aren’t you?” She chuckles gleefully. “They’re really different. But, you still have a chance. I’ve still got plenty of information that I haven’t given over to Miss Ilse yet, after all.”

I can tell that her words have swayed Master Benno significantly, but at this point, he should not be making any firm decisions. He needs to step back, calm down, and go over Maïne’s proposal with careful, deliberate thought. If there are so many points in this plan’s favor, then there must be points against it as well.

“As you say,” I interject, “we must carefully consider whether or not we truly need to train workers to be able to make desserts. Maïne, thank you very much for this wonderful suggestion. It is an enormous help. Won’t you return home and take care of your own needs, though? You must be quite tired after pushing Master Benno around like that.”

“Oooh, Mister Mark,” she says, still slumped over the table, “your kindness always goes straight to my heart.”

I instruct Lutz to ensure that Maïne makes it home safely, then see the two of them out of the shop. After I see them off, I return to the back office, to find Master Benno slumped over like Maïne was just a moment ago, his face buried in a pile of documents.

“Master Benno?”

“Seriously. That girl’s just full of surprises, isn’t she.” “You are very right. I did not expect in the slightest that her plan to avoid friction with the bread makers’ association would have turned into that.”

Master Benno scratches his head, rustling his hair, as he slowly sits upright. He looks at me, a sharp glint in his reddish-brown eyes.

“...What do you think, Mark?”

“I do believe that it would be easier to establish an eatery than it would be to train workers to make desserts. With an eatery, we don’t risk starting any conflicts with the bread makers’ association. Instead, we would have to consider how we would deal with the food vendors’ association, but if we properly follow the processes in place, I do not think that the act of establishing the shop itself would be particularly difficult.” “Agreed.”

Maïne’s proposal is for a high-class place to eat. A shop such as that should not disturb the much cheaper vendors that operate in the town marketplace, so I am comfortable considering that the food vendors’ association will not put forth any significant opposition.

“An eatery isn’t a bad idea. A lot of rich people already employ cooking girls, but those girls are, fundamentally, commoners. So, even if you throw a lot of money at them, all that’ll happen is that you’ll be able to eat a lot

of food. The actual food itself isn't going to change all that much. The food the nobility eat uses recipes that can't be made unless you have a very good cook working in a noble house, so everything of course tastes different, and there's a difference in variety. Even if it's somewhat expensive, considering the subject matter and the flavors involved, I believe a such a shop might be successful."

I have never myself had the opportunity to eat the food of noblemen, so I do not have a clear understanding of what's at play here. Master Benno, however, has eaten it a number of times that could be counted on one hand, as a result of being invited to a meal by a nobleman on several occasions. If Master Benno says so, then I have no doubt that there are significant differences between the food that the nobility eat and the food that merely very wealthy people eat.

"However, how does Maïne know recipes for noble food? That girl's only been at the guild master's house for a few days total. Why does she know so many different varieties of recipes? How can she just produce recipes that require an oven off the top of her head?"

"Because she is Maïne, sir."

I sigh as I answer his question. He seems dissatisfied by my answer, but I have no better explanation to give.

"Mark, you just—"

"It's pointless to waste time thinking on questions we cannot answer. Weren't you the one who said that it doesn't matter who she was as long as she was useful to us merchants, back when she sold us the rinsham? Even after all this time, we've learned nothing new. It's a far better use of our time to instead think of ways to ensure that we do not let her precious information leak out to anyone else."

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head. Benno glances away, as if he felt bad about something, then claps his hands, awkwardly and abruptly changing the topic of conversation.

"Ah, well, sure, but... I've been thinking of adopting Lutz. What do you think, Mark?"

“It would seem that Maïne is having quite the influence on you, sir, if you are blurting out ideas that you haven’t actually thought through.”
“Huuhhh? Well that’s rude! Don’t lump me in with that thoughtless little kid!”

No matter how threateningly he shouts at me, I can’t imagine this idea of adopting Lutz to be anything but thoughtless. If it isn’t, what in the world could he possibly be thinking? If Master Benno, the manager of a shop, is seeking an adoptive son, perhaps he is looking to find an heir amongst the people around him. This would be troublesome for him to do so, however, as it would sow the seeds of strife with Miss Corinna, who has yet to bear a child.

“Well then, if you truly have a reason as to why you would propose something that would cause such great discord between you and Miss Corinna, would you perhaps explain your careful thinking?”

He sighs. “You’re just going to pick this apart, aren’t you,” he grumbles, before explaining why he wants to adopt Lutz.

“First, if we want to keep our connections with Maïne, we absolutely need to secure Lutz. You’re with me so far, right?”

“You’re quite right.”

I already am aware that, because of the magical contract that stipulates that the things Maïne’s Workshop produces will be sold through Lutz, keeping hold of him is very much necessary. Additionally, as Lutz is currently employed as a dalua, when his period of employment is over, if he were to have the inclination to go to somebody else’s shop, he would be entirely capable of doing so. It would seem that preventing this from happening is Master Benno’s objective.

“I was thinking I could hire him on as a dapla, but I’ve been thinking that if I want someone that I can definitely trust with the shop, then maybe adopting him to carve out a more solid position would be a better idea.”

“Wouldn’t hiring him as a dapla be enough, in that case? If you truly need someone you can definitely trust, then when Miss Corinna gives

birth to a daughter, would you not be able to have them marry?"

Rather than raising him as an adopted son, giving him a thorough education as a dapla, then having him marry into the family would cause far less strife, I believe. Master Benno, however, merely shrugs, waving his hand dismissively.

"That's not going to work with Lutz. He's only got eyes for Maïne. Either way, Lutz's original dream was to become a trader. He's been looking for a chance to leave the city. And that's even more reason why I think that tying him down to this shop is going to be really difficult."

"...A trader, you say? That's..."

This is quite surprising. It's very rare for someone born and raised in a city to dream of becoming a trader.

Benno shrugs his shoulders, quirking up the corners of his mouth. "I've been thinking that the main reason for that was because his life at home was so constrained, but honestly, if he didn't have Maïne tying him down, there'd be nothing keeping him here. There's no doubt about how Maïne's going to be swallowed up by the nobility in the near future. I don't know if it's going to be the nobility in this city, or if she's going to get tangled up with some other city's nobility, or even get called all the way out to Central, but... I don't know just what the odds are, but there's a good chance that she's going to leave this city at some point or another."

Lutz is currently an apprentice under Master Benno's patronage, and he has neither knowledge nor anything else that he can use. However, by the time he comes of age, he will have learned quite a lot, and most likely come to realize his own worth. If by this point Maïne has been removed from the city and their magical contract rendered meaningless, it's entirely possible that he might leave for a shop in another city.

"When Maïne leaves this city, I want to be in a position to follow her with Lutz in tow." My eyes narrow slightly. "Why would you go that far, sir?" He gives me a slightly troubled smile. "The actual successor to the Gilberta Company is Corinna. I'm just a middleman. Maïne says she wants to make books, but that's not what this shop does. This isn't going

to be anytime soon, but I'm thinking that maybe I what I really want is to leave the shop to Corinna and Otto and build my own, separate shop."

Ownership of the Gilberta Company is in fact matrilineal, so he is correct: the ones to which the shop should be entrusted are Corinna and Otto. However, I can't quite make the connection between his desire for independence and his intentions for Lutz. As I look at him curiously, he sighs. "Mark can keep a secret," he mutters to himself, and a nostalgic smile floats across his face.

"Lately, when I've been watching Maïne and Lutz, I've been remembering how I used to be. When my dad was still alive, when I didn't have anything to worry about in my life... like how I used to be when I was together with Liese."

The way Lutz and Maïne interact with each other is very reminiscent of the way Miss Liese and Master Benno used to laugh together. I can understand, somewhat, what he is feeling. I can almost see, in the corner of my eye, images of the two of them playing grown-up in the back of the shop or sneakily planning some sort of mischief.

"Looking at those two made me remember. I had a dream, once, before my dad died and I put all of my efforts to keeping this shop and my family safe..."

"Ah yes, your dream of becoming a merchant respected around the whole world."

As soon as I say that, Master Benno's eyes go wide, falling into such a state of disarray that he appears, quite frankly, amusing.

He points accusingly at me. "Wh... why do you remember that?!"

"Because it was your dream, sir."

I do not want this to be taken lightly. I have known Master Benno ever since he was born. As I puff my chest out with pride, he clutches his head, moaning. He is quite terrible at dealing with people who know all of the little details about his childish past. I'm very aware of this. After a moment of continuing to hold his head and grumble, he clears his throat,

as to free himself from his momentary embarrassment.

“If I can keep implementing every one of the things that Maïne’s got in her head, I can actually achieve that dream, can’t I?”

“...This may sound pretentious, but if you indeed can realize everything that Maïne describes, then you truly will gain the respect of the world.”

“So, to start, I’m going to go to the cities my brothers and sisters are in, get paper-making workshops set up there, and start trying to distribute this vegetable-based paper. ...Mark, what will you do?”

He looks up at me, head tilted slightly to the side, leaning back in his chair with his fingers laced together in front of him. Seeing him stare at me, waiting for an answer, almost makes me laugh out loud. After all, when the shop’s previous manager had died, my educational period had ended, and he’d asked me whether or not I would be leaving the shop, he’d worn exactly the same expression on his face.

“I think that Theo might be much better at dealing with Mister Otto than I would be. I’ll come with you. After all, Lutz will need training, won’t he?”

“...Alright then.”

Seeing him sigh in relief brings a nostalgic smile to my face.

Master Benno had forgotten his dream, replacing it with a stubborn desire to protect his family and his shop. Maïne is pushing him into motion, making him form a paper makers’ association, making him get ready to start even more new ventures. Just like Otto had said before, Maïne, to Master Benno, is the goddess of water, bringing about the end of a long, long winter.

And thanks to her, I have remembered my own dreams as well.

Chapter 77: Interlude - A Gatekeeper's Job

I'm Gunther. I'm thirty-two years old, and today I'm standing watch at the south gates to protect my beloved family.

Otto is being extra annoying today. He just can't stop himself from constantly grinning, and he isn't actually doing his job at all. My guess is that something good's happened to his wife, who he just adores. I get it, sure, but that face he's making is just begging for a couple good punches.

"Get yourself together, Otto. Is that the kind of face a gatekeeper makes?!"

"I am keeping myself together!"

When I call him out on it, he smacks himself in the cheeks, making an effort to shape up, but he barely manages anything. His cheeks are a little redder, but he can't keep a straight face at all. As I sigh in astonishment, I hear a low chuckle behind me. I turn around and see my commanding officer, shoulders quivering with laughter.

"Your subordinate's just like you, isn't he?" he says. "He's paying exactly as much attention to his job as you do when you're worried about your daughters."

"Ah...?! Uh, no, sir, what I—" He claps me on my shoulder. "Have a talk with him," he says, sauntering off. "He always does it for you."

Back when I had to miss Tuuli's baptismal ceremony, and whenever Maïne's in trouble, Otto's always been there to listen to me, so I guess I owe him one.

Gotta do it, then. It's not gonna be great, but maybe I should go keep him company after work. ...Although, whenever he really gets started talking about things he loves, he gets completely unstoppable.

I sigh again. Learning that that's what people think of me was pretty unexpected, and I really had no way of knowing that everyone wanted us two irritatingly doting family men to be friends with each other, either.

After we hand over our posts to the night shift, Otto and I start walking

towards the eastern gates. The eastern gates are connected to the main highway, so it gets the most pedestrian traffic, and the road that connects to them is lined with inns and eateries. The side streets and alleys off the main road are packed with shops too, and these are the ones that the people who actually live here tend to use.

Since it's the summer, every single shop has its doors flung wide open, and here and there I can hear the rowdy voices of people enjoying a drink or four. We make our way towards a bar that's a favorite among the soldiers here, taking care to avoid bumping into anyone else along the way.

The bar is full of the smell of food and drink. When we walk in, the two medium-length tables in the middle of the room are full of a party of about ten or so people having a loud conversation about something or other. The handful of smaller, round tables around the edge of the room that are meant for a few people are also almost all full up.

"It's really busy," remarks Otto. "C'mon, over there," I say.

I head towards the back of the room, cutting my way through the noisy party in the middle. On my way, I call out to the manager standing behind the counter.

"Hey, Ebbo! Two bereas this way. And some boiled sausage too, when you get the chance."

"Comin' up!"

I put in an order for two bereas from Ebbo, the manager. To someone like me, who's been a gatekeeper ever since his apprentice days, basically everyone in this little city's an acquaintance, except for the nobles and rich people that keep the curtains closed on their carriages.

I slap down a large copper coin on the counter to pay for the drinks and the sausage, and Ebbo sets out two large wooden mugs, filled to the brim with berea. I grab the mugs, careful not to spill anything, look around the room for an empty spot, and start moving towards a round table near the back of the bar.

The table's still got all the tableware on it from the previous customers, but when the two of us start heading for it a sharp-eyed serving girl quickly runs over to clear off the wooden cups and forks. There's a piece of the bread that they serve meat on instead of plates left on the table, already damp with juice. She uses it to roughly wipe down the table, then tosses it to the ground. The shop dog runs over, tail wagging, and hungrily scarfs it down. Otto and I set our mugs down on the freshly cleared table and sit down, our chairs clattering against the wooden floor.

"We give thanks to Vantolle," we both say, lifting our mugs in gratitude to the god of alcohol, and take a drink.

I down my entire mug in one go, gulping noisily. In my opinion, this is the absolute best way to enjoy a frothy mug of berea. The feeling of the drink pouring down my throat after it's gotten so parched from work is irresistible. The sensation of the tiny little bubbles and that special bitter flavor hit my mouth an instant later.

I let out a satisfied sigh. "That's the stuff! ...So, what's happened?"

I set my empty mug down on the table with a clack. Otto, who still has some froth around his mouth, takes a plate of boiled sausage from the serving girl and orders us another round. As I reach for the chunk of hard bread they served my sausage on, Otto starts acting absolutely lovestruck, foppishly shrugging his shoulders.

"Wellll, Corinna says we're still not telling anyone yet, so even if it's you, sir, I just can't say!"

"What, you're having a kid or something?" "H, how, how did you know that?!" "I mean, based on how you're acting and the fact that your wife doesn't want you to tell anyone, what else could it be?"

Otto gives up, scratching his cheek. To be a little more honest, I figured it out after going through the exact same thing and having someone point it out the same way. No need to tell him that, though.

Seriously, though, Otto's going to be a dad, huh? Is this merry man really going to be okay?

Those words flicker through my head, but even that was something that people asked about me back then, too.

Yeah, if he's so happy about having a child now, then he'll probably be a good, doting father. Based on my own past, I'd bet there'll be no problems there at all.

"Alright, here're your refills! Thanks for waiting."

The serving girl sets down fresh mugs with a heavy clack, their contents sloshing a little and sending a spray of foam over the sides. Neither she nor us customers pays it any mind, though, and I hand her a medium copper coin. Otto and I drink our drinks, distracted by the hubbub around us. Unlike my first mug, I don't slam it back in one go, but instead let the complex flavor roll across my tongue, tasting the bitterness of the wheat mixed with the sweetness of the malt, before finally swallowing it down.

Come to think of it, wasn't Otto's wife the seamstress that Eva and Tuuli admire? Tuuli was saying that after her darua contract runs out at her current workshop, she was going to try really hard to move to Otto's wife's workshop next. Also, her older brother's the proprietor of that company that's been taking care of Maïne. I myself only really know Otto, but it seems like our families have somehow managed to get pretty close.

"Otto, make sure you do right by your wife and kid. Your kid's going to be the heir to a major store, isn't he? Maïne was saying something about that."

"...About that, sir."

His entire demeanor suddenly changes. His face hardens, his foppish demeanor disappearing, and he looks off into space as if he's searching for words. When I see his shoulders tense, just like Maïne's did when she was trying to tell us something she'd been bottling up, my head suddenly cools, the buzz of the alcohol disappearing. Despite the fact that I'd just taken a swig, my throat suddenly feels dry. I take a long, slow drink of my berea.

"...Alright, what is it?"

"Ah~... well, this isn't an immediate thing, but... in a few years, I'm

probably going to quit being a soldier.”

The reason Otto had become a soldier was originally so that he could try to marry the heiress of a major store. A mere trader falling in love with the heiress of a major store. Basically everything about being a trader is different from being a merchant in a city. There's no way a trader could suddenly become a merchant working for a major store. At that point, the people around her were saying that he was only courting her in order to gain the social standing of a major merchant, so she treated him with a lot of suspicion at first. However, when Otto bought his citizenship and found work as a soldier, not a merchant, it showed her how serious his feelings were.

That was a major shock, though, when I heard about it. That happened when I was still stationed at the west gate, so that must have been, what, four years ago? One day, a particular trader, who'd always said that he was selling his wares so he could go home to his parents one day and open a shop in the city they lived in, came through the gates as usual. A few days later, that same trader shows back up again at the gates, saying that in order to woo a woman he'd sold everything he owned to buy a citizenship and was now looking for non-mercantile work. The other gatekeepers had to ask him to repeat himself several times, not believing their own ears.

I'd known Otto since he was a kid, though, all the way back from when his father kept bringing him along his journeys as a trader. It was easy to understand that if a man like him who said that he was going to go back to his parents someday suddenly sold everything to buy citizenship, he must have seriously fallen in love at first sight.

Thanks to his life as a trader, Otto knew his numbers, could read our official documents, and was decently good with his hands. In the end, I'd recommended him to the higher-ups in the guard, on the condition that he was mostly going to be doing paperwork. There are many soldiers who, no matter how diligent they are about training, constantly forget to do their paperwork. Otto joining the soldiery made dealing with the merchants and nobility coming through the gates with their letters of recommendation a lot easier on us all.

But now he's quitting being a soldier? Does this mean that his wife's family has recognized him as a merchant?

I've known for a while that when he's not on duty at the gates, he's been helping out with things at his wife's shop. I also know that he's been making sure to keep his mercantile senses sharp by talking with the traders and merchants that come through the gates. If this is the result of all of his hard work paying off, then I'm really happy for him, but there's something in his face that reminds me of a man who's lost his bearings.

"So now that you're having a kid, is that dutiful older brother of Corinna's finally recognizing you?"

"...No, we've occasionally had conversations about that before, so that's probably not it. I think this is because of Maïne." "What?!"

I slam my cup down, eyes nearly flying out of my head. I hadn't expected that my daughter's name would come up at all. Otto, however, looks a little more relaxed, reaching for his cup and taking a drink.

"Sir, when I was looking for work outside of being a merchant, the reason I thought being a soldier was the best choice for me was so that I could make acquaintances with the people living in this city. I wanted to make sure that I could remember everyone's faces, and that they'd all remember mine. Also, I wanted to be able to know about all the merchants and nobles coming and going, so I decided that being a soldier would be a good way to gather a little intelligence."

"Hmm," I say, noncommittally. "I'd planned to keep being a soldier for a while longer, but things around the store have started changing. The rinsham and hairpins that Maïne brought us have been extremely good products for us, so the Gilberta Company's been achieving great things lately." "Huh, because of the products Maïne brought you?"

I'm happy that Maïne's being praised, and as a parent I'm pretty proud about that, but something feels a bit off about all that. From where I'm standing, rinsham is something that Tuuli made, and the hairpins that Eva and Tuuli made were much prettier than Maïne's. When Maïne tries to make things, she doesn't have enough strength to do it, so she winds up

making a whole lot of mistakes. I can't even count all of the times I've seen her look at something that hasn't turned out quite right with her head tilted to the side in confusion.

"But the Gilberta Company's main business is in clothing and accessories, so when she and Lutz made a vegetable-based paper and brought that to us... it's very profitable and influential, but it doesn't fit the direction of our store. Benno wants to expand the scope of what we sell. Corinna, though, really doesn't have any interest in anything but clothing, so she's been saying that she doesn't want to do any expansion." I frown. "Are you telling me that Maïne bringing you things has been causing conflict?" Otto frantically waves his hand back and forth. "Oh no no no, I wouldn't call it conflict at all. From a merchant's standpoint, all those things are amazing. I totally understand why Benno wants to get involved. It's just that Corinna doesn't want to sell them. That's why Benno's thinking that he wants to hand over the Gilberta Company to Corinna earlier than we'd planned, get me to help, and own his own shop... He's going to start a new shop in order to sell the things that Maïne comes up with to other cities."

If the proprietor of a major store is going all the way as to start a new store, then selling and distributing these products must be generating colossal sums of money. A little while ago, an extremely excited Tuuli had been trying very hard to explain to me that Maïne was actually extremely rich, but I figured, reasonably, that she was just exaggerating. There's no way that a girl just barely out of her baptism would have any real amount of money.

"...So it's true, then, that Maïne's been earning a ridiculous amount of money?"

"It really is. But, she's been extremely careful about controlling her finances. Maybe someone taught her about that, because she's far better at it than you'd expect a kid to be. I don't think you'd have managed to teach her how to calculate transactions at that level, sir, so where in the world did she learn it?"

He grins teasingly at me. I stare back at him for a moment, then snort.

There's only one being that could have taken notice of my cute little girl, filled her to overflowing with mana, and gifted her with knowledge beyond understanding.

"The gods taught it to her. My daughter is beloved by the gods, after all."

"I kept thinking you were just exaggerating like a normal father, but it's kinda scary how persuasive that idea is now."

Otto laughs, shrugging his shoulders, then takes a big bite of his sausage. I take a bite of my own, then turn the conversation back to him.

"So, when are you planning on quitting? We don't have anyone able to take over for your work, you know?"

"Oh, yes, there's no way that I'd be able to hand off my post anytime soon, so I was thinking that it would be sometime in the next two to three years. I've been thinking I want to train up someone to be good at calculations, though." He sighs. "Ahh... Maïne getting caught by the temple was a miscalculation on my part."

I recall that Otto had advised Maïne to not become a merchant's apprentice, trying to convince her that both her physical weakness and the strain she'd put on human relationships meant that it would be better for her to work out of her home. What she decided back then was that she was going to work at home, sometimes come along with me to the gates to do some work there, and keep living like that for as long as she could, wasn't it? I don't think anyone was thinking that she might get caught up by the temple.

"It was a miscalculation for me too, I guess. Maïne had been saying that she didn't want to make any noble's acquaintance, then suddenly she started saying she wanted to go apprentice as a priestess. Just to read books whenever she wanted, huh, that girl..."

Just remembering the time when she'd told me that she wanted to go to the temple and be a priestess makes my grip tighten painfully on the mug.

"It seems like Benno had been gathering information and trying to pull some strings, but... Sir, are you happy with the way things turned out?"

“Do you think I am?” I say, shooting him a sharp look. He raises his hands in defeat, shaking his head. “No, not at all.”

No matter how many good conditions we got, Maïne attending the temple isn’t anything I would have picked by choice.

“I don’t think I possibly could be happy about that,” I say. “They’re promising that she’s going to be treated the same way that the nobles are, but once you start thinking about those guys’ sense of privilege, there’s no way that that’s actually going to wind up happening.”

“...Yes, exactly.”

It’s just lip service. Sure, to make it look good, they’ll probably give her some blue robs, but I know for a fact that they’re not going to treat her the same as a noble in any meaningful way.

“Although, we did manage to avoid getting her thrown in the orphanage. If she can come home, then I still get to see her. Those guys are nobles. Even if all we got out of this was that she didn’t get completely snatched away by them, then that’s still a win in my book.”

“It’s a very precarious position, though.” “...Yeah.”

Maïne’s magic had gone berserk, coercing the temple master into backing down, so things are somewhat hazy right now, but he was originally planning on sentencing me and Eva to death and throwing Maïne into the orphanage. She saved our lives, and we won her the ability to live at home, but that was an enormous concession on the temple’s part. Wishing for any better treatment than that is futile. Rather, the temple master is going to be livid that he was coerced by a mere commoner, and is absolutely going to treat her terribly. Just thinking of what might happen once she starts going to the temple fills me with dread.

“Sir. This is second-hand information, but according to Benno, Maïne has at most five years of relative peace at the temple. Since there aren’t that many nobles around right now, people that have mana are very important, but once their numbers start to increase then there’s a very real danger that they’re going to treat her as a burden.”

“...Just five years, huh? It’s still better than the alternative, though. If she doesn’t go to the temple, then it won’t even be half a year from now before she dies.”

I’m letting Maïne go to the temple for the sake of prolonging her life. That is all I can do for her. If I had magic tools, I could do it myself, but I don’t have either the connections or the money to be able to get any. I’m too worthless as a father.

“If she can’t go to the temple, then making a contract with a nobleman would be fine, too. She has a lot of value: she has mana, and she can make money. If she can demonstrate how valuable she is before things start getting dangerous, then there’s a good chance that she’ll be able to secure better conditions on the contract than just being kept alive.”

“Maïne said that she wanted to stay with her family, so she didn’t want a contract with a noble, but... as her father, I think I’d prefer her to keep living.”

She suffered with her fever for so long, but now that she’s finally able to do the things that she wants to be able to do, I want her to live for the sake of her dreams. But, does her wish to live extend all the way to making a contract with a noble? What kind of noble would she contract with, and what conditions would she be able to get on that contract? Everything is all up to Maïne.

I’m her father, yet there’s so little I can do. Benno consulted with his relatives to gather all sorts of information for her. The guild master sold her one of the magical tools he’d gathered for his own granddaughter’s sake. I can’t help but wonder if they’ve done so much more for her than I ever could.

“...Just what can I do for her, as her father? I don’t have money, I don’t have connections. No matter how important she is to me, in the end, I’m just a soldier that can’t even protect his own daughter, aren’t I? I’m just a bad joke.”

I let the alcohol do its work, letting out the feelings I can’t ever let out at home. I’ve been so self-importantly declaring that I’d protect all of the

families of this town, when there's nothing I can really even do for them.

Otto slowly tilts his head doubtfully to one side as he listens to me grumble.

"No, I'd say that you, the soldier who guards the gates to this city, are the gods' baton of command." I narrow my eyes. "...What do you mean by that?"

Otto glances around the room, which still roils with noisy activity, then leans a little closer, lowering his voice.

"Thanks to Benno's assistance, Maïne is more-or-less well-protected within the city by a magical contract. At the very least, there's plenty of people here in the city who want to keep Maïne safe. Out of all of Benno's predictions, though, the one that we should be most scared of is the possibility that Maïne might be kidnapped by a noble from somewhere else." I gulp. "What happens if she's kidnapped?"

I've been mostly assuming that the danger was going to come from the nobles in the temple. I hadn't even considered that nobles from other parts of the country might have their eyes on her too.

"If she leaves the city, she'll be cut off from the contract magic's effects. If nobles from this city do anything, and someone like the guild master or Benno decide to do something about it, then they might be able to appeal to the lord of the city to investigate the matter. However, if the nobles are from another city, then there's a possibility that they'd be out of the lord's reach."

Benno is the proprietor of a major shop, and it's plain to see that he has a lot of political power. Hearing that someone like him, or the master of the merchant's guild, or even the lord of the city himself have limits to where they can actually exercise that power hits me like a blow to the head.

If the lord of the city can't do something, then how could I possibly do it either? How in the world do I deal with nobles from another city?

I squeeze my forehead tightly, fingers digging into my temples. Otto,

though, gives me a broad, challenging grin.

“If we don’t want that to happen, then we’re going to want to find out this of the priests in the temple has ill feelings towards Maïne and do some investigation into what nobles those people might have relationships with. Also, we’ll need to keep an eye out for any nobles from other places who come to the city, then decide if they’re trouble or not. Since that’s the case, then wouldn’t you think that the gatekeeper’s job of reading every single letter of introduction and written invitation that people bring with them is, in fact, a very suitable job for keeping Maïne safe?”

I blink several times, thinking back on what a gatekeeper’s job is. He’s right in that if you want to know about the movement of the nobility, being a gatekeeper is an excellent way to do so. No noble from other cities ever comes through our gates without either a letter of introduction or a written invitation. Whether by horse or carriage, nobles who enter the city always pass through the gates, then based on their letter of introduction, head straight to the inner ramparts and enter the nobles’ quarter. Distinguished noblemen never ordinarily wander around the districts where us commoners live. If we’re alert for any noble stopping their carriages in the city or heading straight for the temple, then there’s a good chance that we’d be able to head off any kidnapping attempt.

Even if, for example, a nobleman were to hire some thug to do the kidnapping for her, any gatekeeper on duty would instantly recognize them as a stranger. We can pretty easily spot anyone who makes their living doing shady business, too. If I talk to the people here as I make my rounds, asking them if they’ve seen anything suspicious, and get closer to my fellow guards, then I could, just by my every day actions, put myself in a position where I can find out very quickly if something strange is going on. This is entirely part of my job as a soldier.

“Sir, weren’t you the one who said that you became a soldier to protect all the families of the city? Maïne counts. I think that if you just keep doing what you’ve always been doing, you can protect her.”

“Now that I think of it, I think starting next spring we’re going to be

reassigned to the eastern gates. That might be some good luck.”

Every three years, squads are rotated between the gates. That’s probably in place to stop things from getting in a rut, help deepen the bonds between all the soldiers, and make sure the work winds up being the same everywhere, but I don’t really care too much about the actual details. All I care about is the fact that this upcoming spring, my squad is going to be reassigned to the eastern gates. Those gates face the highway, so they have the highest amount of traffic out of all of the gates, and it’ll be the easiest place to get information from. It’s the gate through which the largest number of strangers come through, so it’ll be the place where I’ll need to be the most vigilant.

“You’ll need to be on your guard, and don’t let anything slip by when you’re gathering information,” says Otto. “I think it would be a good idea for you to figure out how you can use your connections with the other soldiers, and go over how they can get in contact with you so that you can start moving as soon as even the littlest strange thing happens. I’ll help, too. After all, Benno’s sticking his nose into all sorts of things these days, so it’s not like this doesn’t affect my family either.”

With a defiant grin, he makes a fist and flexes his bicep, bending his elbow, making the sign we soldiers use to wish each other a good fight.

“Sir. Let’s definitely keep her safe.”

I return his grin and down the last of my berea, washing the last of my melancholy away. My cup clacks against the table as I set it down. I clench my fist and bend my elbow, then tap my fist lightly against Otto’s.

Credits

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